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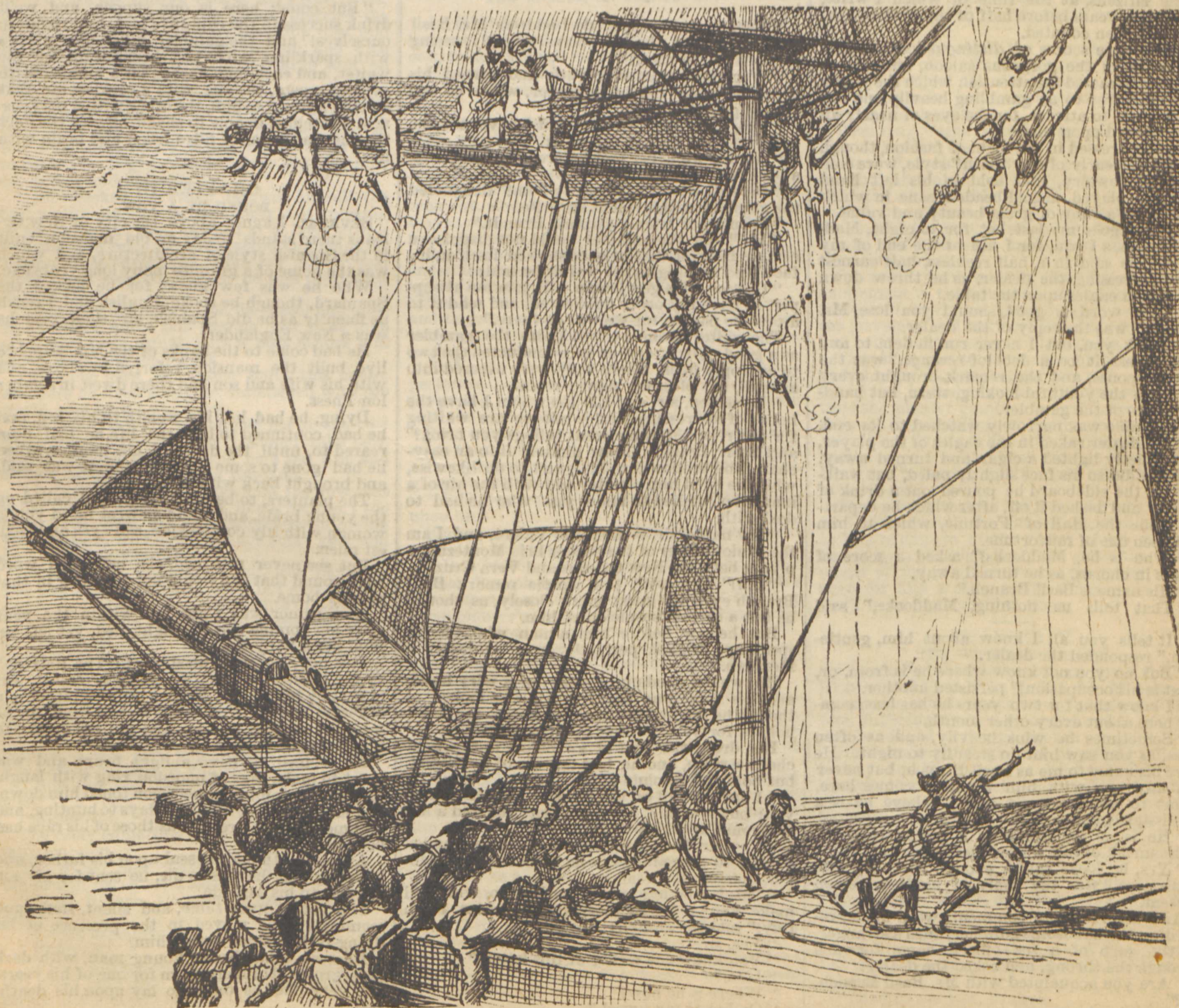
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MERLE MONTE'S CRUISE; or, THE CHASE OF "THE GOLD SHIP."

A Companion Story to "Merle, the Middy," "Midshipman Mutineer," "Floating Feather," and "Gold Ship."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.



"LADS, GIVE THESE FELLOWS LEAD IN PLACE OF THE GOLD THEY SEEK!"

Merle Monte's Cruise;

OR,

The Chase of "the Gold Ship."

A Tale of Southern Waters,

And Companion Story to "Merle, the Middy,"

"The Midshipman Mutineer," "The Floating Feather," and "The Gold Ship."

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS GAMBLER.

In a gilded den of the Crescent City,* where the rustle of cards, the click of dice, and ring of gold mingled together with the hum of voices, a young man stood at a gaming table, playing with the utmost *sang froid*, though losing heavily.

Around him all was magnificence, for the gambling spiders weave golden webs, and make luxury a gilded bait to entice the silly flies who allow themselves to be caught in the meshes.

Soft carpets, that gave no sound to the foot-fall, covered the floors, divans of silk and velvet were scattered here and there, sideboards groaning with edibles to tempt the most satiated palate, wines of France and Spain handed round on silver salvers by negro waiters in livery, and cigars and liquors *ad libitum*, were the rules of this Hall of Fortune, situated in one of the most fashionable centers of New Orleans, and frequented by its most aristocratic citizens, at the time of which I write, which was years before half of the present century had been counted.

There were scores of *distingue* looking men assembled in the gorgeous saloon, but not one of them attracted the attention which the young man I referred to as gambling heavily and losing, seemed to attract, for the eyes of nearly all were riveted upon him.

He was dressed in the height of fashion, though a trifle too nearly of the "flash" style, wore considerable jewelry, and held in his left hand while he played, a gold-headed cane in which glimmered a ruby of great beauty and value.

"There goes my last bet for to-night, Maddocks, unless I win, for I am at the end of my purse," he said in a half reckless, half-earnest way, addressing the dealer, as he threw down ten golden eagles upon the table.

"Your word is good, should you lose, Mr. Branch," was the reply of the dealer.

"Thank you, but I never run in debt to any man, unless it be a debt of *revenge*," was the quiet response, and the remark brought every eye upon the youthful-looking, stern, but handsome face of the gambler.

The game was narrowly watched to its end, and the dealer raked in the eagles of the player, who quietly lighted a cigar and turned away.

As he did so his face slightly paled, but walking to the sideboard he poured out a drink of brandy and dashed it off, after which he departed from the Hall of Fortune, which to him had been one of misfortune.

"Who is he, Maddocks?" asked a score of voices in chorus, as he turned away.

"His name is Basil Branch."

"That tells us nothing, Maddocks," said one.

"It tells you all I know about him, gentlemen," responded the dealer.

"But do you not know where he is from, or, what is his occupation?" persisted another.

"I know that for two years he has been coming here about every other month.

"Sometimes he wins heavily, and as often loses, as you saw him do steadily to-night. He gave his name to me as Basil Branch, but never has any one with him when he comes here, seems to know no one, and I believe he is a Mississippi planter."

"He is as handsome as a picture, and his looks smack of salt water," said a sea-captain.

"Yes, he looks rakish enough to be a pirate in disguise," was the reply of another person present.

And several more comments were made, regarding the handsome gambler, until a stranger, in the garb of a sea-officer, came forward through the throng, and asked the dealer:

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Basil Branch, sir?"

"I am, sir."

*New Orleans, also called the "Oleander City."

"Is he here to-night?" came the next question.

"He is, or rather was, only a moment since; but he has left," answered the dealer.

A look of disappointment passed over the face of the stranger, and seeing it the dealer said:

"He usually goes to the *cafe* for supper after leaving here, and perhaps you may find him there. If you play to-night, perhaps he may drop in before you leave," and the gambler hoped to have the stranger for a victim, but the latter answered:

"No, I never gamble; but I thank you, sir, and shall seek Mr. Branch in the *cafe*."

With that the stranger left, leaving behind him many curious questions as to whom he might be, and what was his business with Basil Branch, for his face wore a nervous, anxious look.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAITOR OFFICER.

UPON his departure from the Hall of Fortune, the seaman went to the fashionable *cafe* near by, where he knew the one he sought must have gone.

There was quite a crowd present, and he ran his eyes curiously over the different faces before him, until at last his eyes fell upon none other than the man whom the dealer had said he knew only as Basil Branch.

"That man answers the description, and I'll venture it."

Walking forward, and declining several tables offered him by the attentive waiters, he took the chair opposite to the one he had picked out as the person he sought, and who looked up with a haughty frown that he was to be annoyed, when there were plenty of vacant seats near by.

"Pardon me, sir, but do I address Mr. Basil Branch?" asked the new-comer quickly, seeing the look of the other.

The gambler started slightly and turned his eyes full upon his interrogator, while he answered politely:

"Yes, I am Basil Branch, but I have not the honor of your acquaintance, sir."

"No, for we never met before, sir; but I bear a letter to you."

"Indeed! may I ask from whom?" demanded the gambler with evident surprise.

"From your friend, Captain Brandt."

"Ha!" and the gambler could not disguise a certain interest that at once showed itself in his face, and turning to the waiter he said:

"*Garcon*, this gentleman will join me at supper, so have my order duplicated, and send it to a private parlor, for we will go there."

The waiter seemed to recognize the gambler as a good patron, and at once conducted the two to an upper floor, where they were ushered into a small, but pleasant supper-room.

"Be seated, sir, and tell me whom I have the honor of addressing, and while we are waiting for our repast, tell me what tidings you bring?" and Basil Branch threw himself into an easy-chair, and motioned to his guest to do likewise, while he eyed him closely, and with the air of a man who wished to know just who he had to deal with.

"My name, sir, is Eduardo Valero, and I am the junior officer of the packet brig *Montezuma*, plying between New Orleans and Vera Cruz."

"Ah!" and with this simple remark Basil Branch eyed his guest more closely, as though he felt a certain suspicion of him.

But he saw before him a man who, though speaking English perfectly, was evidently a Mexican.

He was of medium stature, of a wiry build, and his face was bearded, while he looked as though he might have stepped across the threshold of forty.

His dress was that of an officer in the merchant service, and he had the air of a cunning, but bold and resolute man.

"I have heard of your vessel, sir, but not of you; but you said, I believe, that you had a letter from Captain Brandt for me?"

"Yes, sir, here it is," and the seaman handed a letter to the gambler, who took it in an indolent manner and read it.

"This introduces the Senor Valero, who will make known his wishes, and in whom I can rely," said the gambler.

"Yes, sir."

"You know the writer of this letter?"

"I do."

"Where is he now?"

"On board my vessel."

"Ah! is he in hard luck?"

"He was so unfortunate as to lose his vessel,

was picked up by the *Montezuma*, and lies in my cabin with a broken arm."

"Indeed! The captain is really in hard luck; but, tell me, please, what you know of him?"

"In what respect, senor?"

"Who do you know him to really be?"

"A pirate!" was the low response.

"Yes, but *what pirate*?"

"None other than the famous chief, Brandt, the Buccaneer."

"True; I see I can trust you, so tell me how it is the chief wished me to serve you, or him?"

"He said you could procure a good crew for him, and an officer in whom he could wholly rely."

"I can do so; but for what purpose?"

The Mexican glanced around him nervously, and then answered in a whisper:

"To seize the *Montezuma*."

"By heaven! a bold plot and well worthy of the chief."

"But when does he wish this officer and crew?"

"To-morrow, as the brig must return to Vera Cruz very soon."

"Look you, Senor Valero, I live up the river, and am supposed to be a planter of wealth; but I have lost heavily of late at the gaming table, and as Captain Brandt's ventures always bring gold, I'll go myself as his officer, and procure for him a crew to-morrow, as you can inform him."

"But what part do you play in this affair?"

The Mexican's swarthy face flushed at this direct question; but he answered quietly:

"I need gold, and consequently sell myself for it."

"I understand; you are a traitor to your ship for so much gold in hand paid. Well, I hope you get a good price for your honor, as it is a commodity you cannot buy back."

"But come; here is our supper, and we'll drink success to the captain's plot, and riches to ourselves!" and the gambler filled two glasses with sparkling wine, just brought in by the waiter, and each man dashed off a bumper with evident gusto, the one with a reckless air that seemed natural to him, the other with a nervousness he seemed unable to shake off, for the fact that he was a traitor filled heart and brain with fire.

CHAPTER III.

BOUND BY A VOW.

SEVERAL leagues above the city of New Orleans there stands to-day an old mansion built in the Spanish style of architecture, and which was the home of a grandee many long years ago.

Who he was few knew, for he looked the Spaniard, though he spoke English and French as fluently as he did Spanish, and some said he was a New Englander.

He had come to the banks of the Mississippi to live, built the mansion referred to above, and with his wife and son had there dwelt in somber loneliness.

Dying, he had left his wealth to his son, and he had continued to live the life he had been reared to, until the death of his mother, when he had gone to some foreign land, it was said, and brought back with him a bride.

The planters, to be neighborly, had called on the young bride, and found a sweet-faced young woman with lily complexion, sad eyes and modest mien.

But she never returned the calls, and word went round that she would not live long in that gloomy home.

And rumor was right, for within the year after her coming she one night died, yet left behind her a baby boy.

This boy, the third master of "The Retreat" as the plantation manor-home was called, was reared by his lonely, gloomy-hearted father in a different manner from what he had been, for he was sent away to college, and did not return to his birthplace for years.

He seemed to have a light heart, and was wont to make the old mansion ring with laughter; but his somber parent soon toned him down, and ere long he devoted his days to hunting, and became as great a recluse as those of his race had been before him.

At last death laid its seal upon his father, and knowing that he was to die, he sent for his son to come to his bedside.

The young man came, and silent, stern, and seemingly little moved in the presence of his dying father, stood before him.

He was a handsome young man, with dark face, grown strangely stern for one of his years, and very like the one who lay upon his death-bed.

"My son," said the father, "I have sent for you to say that I am dying."

"So the doctor told me when I asked him awhile ago," was the response.

"It was my nature, my son, to have treated you differently, and to have lived a different life for your sake, and I sought to break the bonds upon me by sending you away; but upon your return the vow of my father was ever before me, and I felt that I must submit to cruel fate."

"The vow of your father?" asked the youth, in surprise.

"Yes. Your grandfather, my father, was an Englishman, and the heir to a noble title and estate; but he was not loved by his father, who made a favorite of his younger brother, and made of him an idol, and to such an extent that he longed for the death of his eldest son."

"My father loved devotedly a most beautiful and true-hearted maiden. Yet to marry her against the will of his parents was a law with those of our race that would render him penniless, though the title he might keep."

"His younger brother also loved this maiden, and knowing that my father's affection was deepest and truest, his parents determined to take advantage of it for the good of their pet son."

"To do this the proposal was made to my father to give up his title and estates and set sail with his bride for a foreign land, and let it be supposed that both were lost at sea."

"Then the second brother could inherit the title and estates, excepting a certain sum that was to be paid my father in cash, to enable him to live in luxury in the land of his choice."

"Living there he was to take another name, and make solemn vow never to reveal to other than his eldest son the story of his past, and that son was to take upon himself the same oath."

"To gain his heart's choice my father, your grandfather, accepted the terms, married the maiden, who was bound by the same vow, and set sail in a vessel fitted out for him, and with the gold given him, which was a large sum, on board."

"The captain of this vessel had been bribed to wreck his craft and all on board, excepting such men as he needed to aid his own escape, and with the treasure, which was to fall to him, to return to England and report the death of my father and his wife."

"He wrecked the vessel, but was himself the first victim, and his second officer, not knowing of the bribe and plot, escaped in a boat with a few men and returned to England and made his report, little dreaming that my father and mother had escaped, though he had tried hard to save them."

"But they did escape, for the vessel had gone on an island, and a sail passing near some time after saw their signal, sent a boat ashore and saved them and their gold."

"Coming here, my father built this house, and here he lived a recluse, imbibed with the world, and here I was born."

"When dying my father told me of the vow and exacted from me that I should take oath not to disturb the one who held the title and estates, all his own, then in England."

"I obeyed him, and I have kept the vow; but it has preyed upon me, and, like a recluse, I too have lived here, my only happiness in loving your mother, who lived but one short year and died in giving you birth."

"I met her while traveling, won her love, and was so selfish that I could not give her up, and brought her here to live the life of a recluse."

"Now, my son, I, according to the vow made by my father, must exact from you the same pledge that I made to him, never to reveal that he did not die, as was supposed in the shipwreck, and never to claim the title justly your own, when I am dead, or the estates also belonging to you."

"This home, its broad acres and slaves are yours and will give you ample income, so here live and be content, if you cannot be happy."

"Now, my son, take the oath I demand of you."

"Never!"

The reply came in a deep voice that trembled with emotion.

The dying man started, fixed his eyes upon the face of his son and asked:

"Basil Branch, do you refuse to take the vow?"

"I most certainly do."

"Reflect!"

"I will not reflect, for I am not to bind myself body and soul by any foolish vow your father and yourself have made."

"I am a man and will act for myself."

"Then you must take the consequences."

"I will."

"You do not know what the consequences are."

"I do not care, sir."

"Listen! If you refuse to take the vow, then I make my will and disinherit you."

"Bah! you are dying now, and you have not the strength to change the will, already made in my favor, as I know."

"But I have the strength and will call for help."

"Help!"

The voice was husky and weak, and could not penetrate far; but the dying man seemed suddenly to gain unnatural strength, and half raised himself from his pillow.

But then the son sprung forward, a wild light in his eyes.

He would not bind himself by a foolish oath; but gold was his God, and he would not see that slip from him.

Instantly his mind was made up, and seizing a pillow he placed it over the head of his father, and forced him back upon the bed.

There was a faint struggle, a smothered cry or two and all was over.

But the son rested his head upon the breast, to hear if the heart-beats had ceased, and apparently satisfied walked from the room, white, trembling and stern, and called the house servants to tell them that his father was dead.

They had expected it daily for some time, and, as he had been a kind master they felt deep sorrow, while Basil Branch walked forth into the darkness, and stood upon the river-bank, his head uncovered that the night breeze might cool his heated brain.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RESCUE ON THE RIVER.

As Basil Branch stood upon the river-bank, beneath the sheltering foliage of a huge live-oak, he felt the full enormity of his crime.

His father had been a stern, yet kind parent, and he had both respected and loved him, in his way.

But to find that his father was bound by an oath, which he did not leave as an inheritance of dishonor and shame to him, would deprive him of his riches, was more than he could tamely submit to under the excitement of the moment, and he had taken that father's life, driven mad with passion, and dread of becoming a pauper.

A few more hours, perhaps less, would have ended the career of his father, but that did not render him any the less a parricide.

No; he was a murderer in all the word meant, and he felt the terror, degradation and remorse that was to be his through life as he stood there gazing out into the darkness.

And as he stood thus, while the faithful slaves performed the last duties toward the dead, in preparing him for the grave, there came to his ears the sound of voices out upon the river.

The words that were spoken aroused him more than the sound, which was not uncommon, as barges from the upper plantations were often going to and from the city.

"Pull, boys! pull for your lives! for they gain upon us."

Such were the words, spoken in a deep, earnest voice; and then came:

"Row, devils! for the game is already ours."

Basil Branch knew well that the river pirates were often abroad, and did not doubt but that some planter's barge was then being chased by the Mississippi marauders.

In his then mood he was ready for any scene, and with the speed of a deer he bounded back to the mansion.

To call the crew of his barge—eight negro oarsmen and a coxswain—was the work of a moment, for the slaves were all then congregated about the mansion, talking over the death of their master.

Arming himself and his crew, he sped toward the river, followed by his faithful servitors, and in five minutes after hearing the voices out in the darkness, was in his barge and pulling up the stream.

The sound of oars he heard above, and in that direction he headed.

But hardly had the crew given a dozen vigorous strokes when there was heard a crash, a shot, then voices, and then the sound of a sharp, fierce conflict.

"Pull, boys! pull together!" he cried, and the negro oarsmen made the barge nearly leap from the water.

* In olden times the Mississippi river planters had barges, or boats, for their own use, manned by their slaves.

THE AUTHOR.

On, on it sped, to soon come upon an exciting scene.

Drifting down with the current were two large barges, lashed together, the bow of one to the stern quarter of the other, and the crews of each were engaged in a desperate conflict.

Neither crew saw the boat of Basil Branch coming upon them, and the one that had been in pursuit of the other was the larger of the two, and was crowded with men, who had gained a footing upon the deck of their foe and were pressing them toward the bow.

Basil Branch at once ranged alongside of the upper craft and instantly sprung on board, a sword in one hand and a pistol in the other, while his faithful slaves were at his back.

At a glance he recognized the position of affairs, and that a plantation barge, with its sable crew, master and his family had been attacked by river pirates.

His coming alone saved them, for the pirates were beating the planter and his crew back as Basil Branch arrived.

Taken by surprise, the pirates turned, were met with sword and pistol, and while some of them fell before the young man's death-dealing blows, others jumped into the river to save themselves.

"Thank God! you have come, sir; for you have saved us; but I fear my poor father is dying," cried a sweet voice, and Basil Branch felt his hand in a warm grasp and saw before him in the uncertain light a fair form bending toward him.

He spoke comforting words, and then bent over the prostrate form of the master, who had received a severe wound.

Instantly he gave orders for the crew to pull to the Retreat landing, and soon the wounded man was borne to a pleasant room in the handsome mansion, and the physician had been sent for.

The next day, while the wounded planter lay at the point of death, his daughter bending over him, the body of the dead master of the estate was borne to its last resting-place, followed by the remorse-haunted son.

Then long weeks passed away, and at last the planter died of his wounds, and to the keeping of Basil Branch he intrusted his only child, his daughter Annabel, and her fortune, for she was left with considerable wealth.

And her father too was laid away in the grave, and the two, Basil and Annabel, became lovers, and then were made man and wife by the parish priest.

But as the years went by Basil Branch sought excitement in the wine-cup and at the gaming-table, and slowly his fortune faded away, until the last slave and last acre inherited by his wife had been sold to pay gambling debts.

Then he began to draw upon his own fortune, and day by day to beggar his wife and child, for he had a lovely daughter of fourteen, at the time the planter-gambler is first introduced to the reader in the Hall of Fortune in the city.

In this wild life in the city, to keep up his appearance of wealth, Basil Branch had drifted from bad to worse, until he had taken to smuggling to gain gold.

Thus it was that he had been thrown in contact with Brandt, the Buccaneer, who had sent to him to dispose of the result of his red robberies upon the high seas, and given the traitor officer of the brig Montezuma the letter to procure for him a crew ready for any desperate work to be demanded of them.

CHAPTER V.

THE WOUNDED PIRATE.

In a comfortable state-room, on board the New Orleans and Vera Cruz packet ship Montezuma, lay a man, whose appearance indicated that he was suffering from a wound, for his left arm was bandaged as though broken.

He was a man of splendid physique, tall, and sinewy, and his face was bold to recklessness, resolute to stubbornness, and cruel to wickedness of the basest type, though withal, certainly handsome as far as regularity of feature was concerned.

Suddenly the door opened and two persons entered.

One of them was the Senor Valero, second officer of the vessel, and the other was Basil Branch.

"I have brought the Senor Branch to see you as you requested, captain," said Valero, and he left the state room, while the wounded man remarked:

"Glad to see you, Branch."

"Be seated, and we will talk over matters."

"And I am sorry to find you in this plight, Captain Brandt—"

"Sa—! not too loud, for Brandt is a bad name here.

"But, as regards my being here wounded, it is not as bad as it looks, for I might have been in worse quarters, I assure you.

"The truth is, Branch, I lost my schooner; how, it matters not now, and I was left adrift in mid-ocean with a broken arm, when this brig picked me up.

"Valero, the man who just left, is second officer, and recognized me, for I once captured a vessel he commanded, robbed it, and let it go, and he intended to revenge himself upon me by betraying me and handing my neck over to the Government to stretch, and at the same time pocket the reward on my life.

"I persuaded him, by bribery, to act with reason, and my idea is to ship a crew on this craft that I wish you to pick for me, as I dare not be seen ashore, and must play severely sick here until we get to sea.

"Then, with my crew, I shall seize the vessel and sail for a spot that I have in mind, where is a treasure that is of almost fabulous value."

"And, as I told your messenger, Valero, I wish to accompany you, as one of your officers," said Basil Branch.

"What? you turn pirate?" asked Captain Brandt in surprise.

"Why not?"

"I thought you had a plantation home up the river, and a lovely wife and daughter?"

"True, but my love of gambling has beggared them, and I believe that I can enrich myself by a piratical cruise of a few months, and then return and settle down."

"You can, and if you go with me you shall have a share of my treasure."

"Done! I will come on board as a passenger, as soon as I have visited my home and told my wife and daughter that important business calls me away for a few months.

"Valero can bring on board the crew I select for him, and I will soon follow, and the vessel shall be ours ere she is ten leagues from the Delta."

"She shall, and with her I shall enrich myself and reap a revenge upon two persons I have long hunted upon sea and land.

"Go now, Branch, and select me a score of men whom I can rely upon for any deviltry."

"You may trust me to do that, Captain Brandt," was the low reply; and rising from the side of the berth, Basil Branch, the paricide, the gambler, smuggler, and lastly, intended pirate, left the brig and hastened up into the city upon his mission of wrong, not knowing that his steps were dogged by one who had long ago sworn bitter revenge against him.

CHAPTER VI.

A CREW OF CUT-THROATS.

WHEN Basil Branch left the brig after his secret interview with Brandt, the Buccaneer, one of the last of the West Indian freebooters to float his black flag upon the waters, he wended his way to a part of the Crescent City which was at the time of which I write, noted as a quarter where seamen most did congregate, and where could be found men of all nationalities ready to ship for any cruise, so that it brought them gold.

In those days sailors were wont to be fickle as to the flags they served, and in fact they are today, but then they cared little, many of them, whether their colors were black, red or blue, and often chose the former if the booty to be gained paid them well.

Of course, in the sailor quarters there were many honest tars to be found—the wheat among the tares; but there were wine shops there where none but the outlaw element found a rendezvous, and it was to such a place that Basil Branch bent his steps.

He stopped after some minutes' walk before a wine-shop of the lowest description, and before which sat a man of large proportions quietly sipping a glass of wine.

Inside was loud talking in several languages, oaths and the clinking of glasses, but it seemed not to disturb the equanimity of the host without—for such he was.

"Garamba! we meet again, senor," he cried, as his eyes fell upon Basil Branch.

"Yes, Fernandez; and I need your services; so come into the house with me," was the reply.

"That means gold in my pocket, senor, as always it does, so gladly I come," was the reply of the wine-shop keeper, and entering the saloon, reeking with the fumes of tobacco and bad liquor, he led the way toward a door at the further end.

The crowd looked up at the two, and one cried as he spied the elegantly-dressed stranger:

"Fine clothes here, monsieur, are out of place, unless the hand is free in finding gold in the purse."

"Here, Fernandez, bid your bar-man give these lads a treat at my expense," answered Basil Branch, with some impatience, as he passed on amid a cheer from the crowd for him, as soon as the wine-shop keeper gave the order to let all have drinks and cigars.

"Now, senor, what can I do to serve you?" asked Fernandez as he led his visitor into an inner room and placed a seat for him at a small table.

"I need a crew."

"Ah! another run to be made into Havana, senor, for goods that the Government demands duty upon?"

"It matters not for what purpose I need the crew, Fernandez; though I wish men who are not afraid to go anywhere I may lead them."

"You can have just such men, senor."

"When?"

"When do you want them?"

"I wish them engaged at once, and to hold themselves in readiness to start at a moment's notice."

"Very well, senor, I will just let you select your own crew."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, senor, for there are a number of good men in the shop: but how many will you need?"

"Twenty."

"You can easily be suited with that number."

"One moment, please."

The man disappeared and in an instant almost returned with a villainous-faced Frenchman.

"Here is Jacque, senor, a good sailor and a brave man."

"Well, my man, I want a crew for work that is no child's play, but which has two ends," said Basil Branch in a free and easy way.

"You would say, monsieur, dat one of ze eend was ze gold an' ze uzzer was ze rope?" said the Frenchman calmly.

"Yes."

"If ze expedition meet wiz ze uzzer it is ze gold?"

"Yes."

"If ze uzzer way, it is ze rope?"

"You are right, my man."

"Vell, Monsieur le Captain, I am ze very man to take ze chances," was the philosophical response.

"Then you are the very man I want."

"Have you any comrades who will join you?"

"No, monsieur, I am all alone in ze vide, vide world."

"Very well, consider yourself as shipped, board here with Fernandez, and be ready to go on board at a moment's notice."

"Oui, Monsieur le Captain," and taking the gold piece handed him by Basil Branch the happy and reckless Frenchman returned to the wine-shop.

The next one called was a German, slow of movement, but with the look of a man who could move quickly to execute evil.

He was calculating in his questions, wanted to know just about how much he might make, to risk his neck for, and what were the exact chances of escape against capture.

Basil Branch gave him the desired information, and he shipped with him and received his fee of gold.

A Spaniard came next whom Fernandez introduced as:

"A most brave devil, senor, and an honest man."

"He looks the former, but not the latter," was the comment of Basil Branch.

But he took the man for the very look of devil in his face.

And thus they came until twenty-two reckless, desperate men had been shipped for a cruise, the nature of which they cared not, so that gold was the result, and to gain which they were willing to take all chances.

The last man shipped was the very one who had dogged the steps of Basil Branch, as he left the brig.

He had been standing on the levee, gazing at the vessels in the port, when he had seen Basil Branch come ashore from the brig.

He had started at seeing him, gazed most fixedly into his face, and then followed him.

He was a man above the medium height, well formed, and with a darkly bronzed, bearded face, strongly marked with dissipation and crime, though bearing still the trace of having once been far different.

He was dressed in the suit of an ordinary sailor, and yet walked with the air of one who had trod the quarter-deck.

Seeing Basil Branch go into the wine-shop, he too had entered, and arrived in time to receive a glass of grog and cigar from the bounty of the stranger.

Watching all that transpired he saw that one by one Fernandez called men from the saloon and that upon their return they invariably paid for drinks, and put down a gold piece to do so with.

Selecting his man, after a quick survey of the faces of those thus called out, he invited him to share a bottle of wine with him, and was not long in finding out that a crew was being shipped for some desperate work, and at once muttered to himself:

"I'll risk recognition, and go too into that secret chamber."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERIOUS SEAMAN.

"MESSMATE, I'm ashore now and want a berth, so if you manage to get me shipped, along with the rest of you, I've got a golden eagle in my pocket for you."

So said the strange sailor, to the one who was sharing the bottle of wine with him, and who happened to be the Frenchman, Jacque.

"But, monsieur, it is not possible for me to do so."

"Why not?"

"Vell, monsieur, ze host calls ze men up zat he wants."

"But you can tell him I am a friend, or shipmate of yours."

"I have tell zem zat I am alone in ze vide world, monsieur."

"Well, tell them that you have just run afoul of an old messmate on a former cruise."

"Call me Pierre, and say I am a Frenchman and your cousin, if you wish."

"But is monsieur French?" asked Jacque in his native tongue, and the answer came in the purest French:

"I am whatever it is best for me to be, Frenchman or Spaniard, English or American, Jew or Turk."

"Ah! monsieur is ze great man."

"I am one who pays well for favors rendered."

"Here, take these two eagles and go and tell the host that I am a messmate you wish to have ship with you."

"I will, monsieur," and pocketing the gold Jacque walked over near the door, and waiting for the reappearance of Fernandez, told him that he had just found an old messmate, whom he wanted to ship with him.

"Send him here, if he is a good man, Jacque," was the reply.

"He is the best of men, monsieur," was the reply, and the mysterious seaman was beckoned over and a moment after was face to face with the man he had dogged.

Basil Branch looked up as he entered, and Fernandez told him he was recommended by the Frenchman; but there was no sign to show that he recognized him as any one he had ever seen before.

A few words passed between the two, and Basil Branch seemed so pleased with the man, that he shipped him as boatswain, and the strange seaman departed.

But, once out of the presence of the man he had dogged for some purpose, he muttered:

"So, Basil Branch, we meet again, and after sixteen long years."

"And this is our third meeting, but shall not be our last."

"Just seventeen years ago, you caught me cheating at cards and denounced me, and a disgraced man, I lost the hand of the woman I loved, and hoped to have won for my wife."

"Your exposure made me a reckless man, and I earned gold as a river pirate, and when Annabel Tracey was almost in my power you appeared upon the scene and rescued her, and she is now your wife."

"I barely escaped death that night by swimming ashore, and my band of Mississippi marauders being broken up, I was forced to take to salt water."

"Since then, Basil Branch, I have been a pirate, and many a hard knock have I received; but now I am the owner of a fleet little craft, and my day of revenge has come."

"I saw the vessel you came from, and know that you have shipped a crew for desperate work, so I will boldly act."

"As soon as you have sailed I will seek your lovely wife and tell her that you have sent for her to join you in Galveston."

"I will give her gold and tell her that you sent it, and that she must go by the Galveston packet, which sails in ten days, and which craft I am now waiting to capture, and thereby I will gain a double prize, and have my revenge on you—for I will be avenged, I vow before high heaven, on you, Basil Branch." And having uttered this oath, the self-confessed pirate arose and left the wine-shop.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PIRATE'S PRIZE.

THE good brig Montezuma set sail under circumstances that were not at all favorable, for she lost her well trained crew, from foolish rumors that got about that frightened the superstitious seamen, for it was said that the stranger in Senor Valero's state-room would die before the craft made port; and then, from a delay caused by colliding with a lugger in getting under way, she was forced to sail on Friday.

In those days Friday was a most ill-omened day for a vessel to leave port on, and it was no wonder that her crew deserted.

But a new crew, quickly shipped by Senor Valero, came on board, and the Montezuma at last set sail down the river.

Once out of the river, and then suddenly appeared upon deck none other than the wounded man who had been picked up in the Gulf.

Like a trumpet his voice rung out:

"Men! seize this craft in the name of Brandt, the Buccaneer!"

A wild cheer answered the startling command. Cries of alarm followed, a few pistol-shots from determined passengers, blows upon the heads of several seamen not belonging to the outlaw band, and then the Montezuma was in the hands of the captors.

Among the first seized was the Senor Valero, and he was at once put in heavy irons and sent below, with the threat of the pirate chief:

"I have not forgotten you, senor, and shall keep you until I can wreak upon you my revenge."

Then the order was given to keep the brig away, to head off a coaster that was making for the mouth of the river, and an hour after the passengers and honest men of the crew were put on board the trading craft, and the Montezuma squared away for her cruise of crime under her new captain. And ere she was half a league apart from the coaster the Senor Valero came on deck, rubbing his hands with delight at the thought that his compact with Brandt, the Buccaneer, would enrich him, and his nicely-devised little plot enable him to return among his fellow-men as a man of honor, who had been the prisoner of a cruel pirate chief.

And upon the deck of the prize stood another man, who, whatever the world might believe him as wild, reckless and a gambler, did not look upon him as what he really was, a paricide, a smuggler and last a pirate.

"Come, Branch, you are now my first officer; you, Valero, must be my second, and where is the man you said you had selected as boat-swain?" and Brandt, the Buccaneer, cast his eyes over the crew, as he addressed Basil Branch.

"He did not come on board, for some reason, Captain Brandt," was the reply.

"Well, we must look up another man," and one was soon selected from the crew, and then orders were given to throw the few dead bodies overboard, for several had been killed in the seizure of the brig, and then the Montezuma was squared away for a point on the Mexican coast.

"May I ask your destination, Captain Brandt?" asked Basil Branch, as the two stood on the quarter-deck together.

"Certainly."

"You have a small crew with which to defend yourself in case of being attacked by a cruiser."

"It is not my intention to fight, Branch, and the smaller the crew, the less the amount to pay them."

"The truth is, I am on a cruise for a Treasure Island."

"A Treasure Island?"

"Yes, one on which is buried a fortune fit for a king."

"Indeed! is there such an island?" asked Basil Branch, with surprise.

"There is."

"Where you have buried your riches?"

"Oh, no, but where riches are buried that all I have taken are but a drop in the bucket to in comparison."

"And you know just where this island lies?"

"I should, for I was wrecked there some time ago."

"I congratulate you upon your venture, Captain Brandt."

"I feel that it will turn out well, and then, Branch, you and I shall be millionaires, for I shall share liberally with you."

"Thank you, and with the Senor Valero?"

"Oh! he gets a share of course; but then he would have betrayed me had I not bribed him not to do so, and consequently I do not feel most kindly toward him."

"And the crew?"

"Shall all be paid most handsomely, as soon as this vessel bears my treasure to a safe haven."

"But how came this treasure on the island?"

"You have heard of Montezuma?"

"Yes, a man who flashed through New Orleans society like a brilliant meteor, and then disappeared as mysteriously as he came."

"The same."

"Well, captain, what of him?"

"You remember that he possessed fabulous wealth?"

"I have so heard."

"Well, he went to Persia, now nearly twenty years ago, and being the son of a Persian princess and of Freelance, the Buccaneer—"

"What! the famous American rover of nearly half a century ago?"

"Yes."

"Pray continue, for I am interested."

"By his father and mother he got vast wealth, and driven from Persia, he set sail in a vessel of which I was an under officer, and his wife accompanied him."

"A rival pursued his vessel, a fight occurred, and Montezuma was slain, while in the midst of the battle his wife gave birth to a little boy, which was left to the care of several Abyssinian slaves."

"They continued on in the vessel, hid the fact of the death of their master and mistress, as long as they could do so, until they could get rid of the crew, and after setting me adrift their vessel was wrecked upon the island I now seek."

"There, on that island, the slaves brought the boy up from infancy to youth, and by capturing no less a pirate than myself, for I had turned to piracy, and delivering my vessel and myself to the captain of a United States cruiser, he got a middy's berth in the navy, but is now a fugitive from justice, under the name of Merle Monte, the mutineer midshipman."

"Ha! I have heard of the brave lad, and how he resisted the officer who was punishing his hideous slave, and was tried as a mutineer for it, and condemned to be hanged at the yard-arm and escaped."

"That is the youth, and he has escaped me for long years, though I have sought most diligently for him, and when at last I believed him in my power, with his treasure, I was wrecked in my vessel on the island, by trusting as a pilot one I had thought was a negro lad, but who turned out to be a woman in disguise, seeking revenge against me."

"I, with two seamen, escaped death in the wreck, but found this accursed woman alive, and she drove us from the island in an open boat, while she remained there, professing that this Merle Monte and his hideous slave, Mezrak, were still alive."

"I knew, if she spoke the truth, they would kill me, so took her advice and departed."

"But if she sought your life, why did she not kill you, if you were in her power, as you say?"

"Ah! the depth of her hate is unfathomable, Branch."

"She wished to spare me, that some day she might bring me to the gallows."

"Ah!"

"Yes, and she will do it, if in her power; but now I hold the winning hand, and, in this good brig will run to the island, and, if Merle Monte and his slave are there, sweet will be my revenge on them."

"If not, that woman will certainly be there, for there is no way for her to depart from the island, and then I will show you what my revenge upon her will be."

"Well, whatever be your course, my fate is linked with yours, Captain Brandt, and being it gold or the gallows, here is my hand upon it."

The buccaneer chief grasped the offered hand warmly, and the compact of crime was made between them.

CHAPTER IX.

BRANDT'S VICTIM.

HEAD winds beat the good brig with her bad crew back, and therefore it was many days before the Treasure Island, the Mecca of Buccaneer Brandt, was sighted.

Then the weather was not suitable for a landing, and when at last a calm came, and the brig was towed slowly into the little basin, which was the only harbor of the island, and a dangerous one at that, two months had passed, since a woman, out of revenge, had wrecked the chief on those ragged rocks, and thus ended the career of a beautiful, but crime-reddened little craft that had long been a terror upon the seas, under her daring and cruel master.

As the vessel was towed into the little haven, Brandt, the Buccaneer, smiled grimly upon the wreck of his once beautiful Sea Serpent, which lay shattered upon the ragged reef, and he saw with delight that her guns could be secured as an armament for the brig.

"The Huntress shall have guns, Mr. Branch, to protect my treasure, for see, I will get those from the wreck of my cutter yonder," said the chief, pointing to the wreck, and referring to the brig Montezuma under the name of Huntress, which he had given her.

"Yes, Captain Brandt, there is certainly a feeling of safety in being at sea on an armed deck," answered Basil Branch.

Bounding ashore, upon the rocky island, seemingly devoid of vegetation, habitation and human kind, Brandt, the Buccaneer, started toward the interior, followed by Basil Branch, the Senor Valero and the entire crew, all eager to find the treasure.

They had not gone far before a post was discovered, and upon it an iron box was securely fastened.

With a cry the chief sprang toward it, and then he fairly shouted forth what he read there, written in red letters:

"THE CONTENTS OF THIS IRON BOX ARE LEFT
FOR
BRANDT, THE BUCCANEER,
BY
MERLE, THE CONDEMNED MIDSHIPMAN."

Throwing open the iron lid of the box, while his men fairly started back in fear, as they saw his livid, savage face, he seized a letter addressed as follows:

"TO BRANDT BRENTFORD,
at as,
"BRANDT, THE BUCCANEER."

Breaking the seal he read aloud, and in tones hoarse with passion:

"SIR PIRATE—I have this day sailed in my own vessel, a flagless, havenless craft, with all my treasures on board. By the request of my First Luff, Belle Denham, alias 'Little Belt,' Mr. Belden, 'Black Diamond,' and the 'Black Pilot,' I leave you something to treasure, viz.:

"Manacles to fit your wrists and ankles."

"A rope to hang you with."

"A flag for you to die under."

"Should you desire to reap revenge upon me, you have but to find upon the high seas

"THE GOLD SHIP."

Not a word was said, for all forgot their own misfortune and disappointment, in gazing upon that of their chief.

No, not all, for the Senor Valero, maddened by the thought of how deeply he had missed, and what he had lost, cast the blame upon the one he might have betrayed, and gained thereby honor, and a fair sum in gold, as the price of the buccaneer's head.

"Curse you, Brandt, the Buccaneer! and this is the fool's chase you have led us upon!" cried Valero, in hoarse tones.

It was all that the chief needed; some one upon whom to visit his fury, and turning upon the Mexican, he shouted:

"Ha! you accursed traitor, you dare to insult me with the sound of your voice?"

"Seize him, men, and drag him to the brig, and I will have a victim to satiate my fury."

The frightened seamen dared not refuse, and the now trembling and alarmed Mexican was at once seized by them and borne to the boat.

All followed, and as soon as the deck was reached, Brandt, the Buccaneer, shouted:

"Put a rope round his neck and up with him, you lazy dogs!"

In vain the wretch shrieked for mercy, for mercy held no place in the heart of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and into the air, struggling, groaning, dying, the traitor officer was drawn.

"Now warp this craft alongside yonder wreck, men, and we'll get the guns on board, and to the uttermost ends of the sea will I follow Merle Monte and his Gold Ship, and his treasure, and revenge shall yet be mine."

The men sprang nimbly to work, and before long the guns of the wrecked Sea Serpent were

transferred to the deck of the *Huntress*, which at once was towed out to sea, with the victim of her chief still swinging, a ghastly sight, at the yard-arm.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER FOE IN THE GOLD SHIP'S WAKE.

THE day after the *Huntress*, as the metamorphosed brig *Montezuma* will now be known, sailed from the deserted island, where such fond hopes had been built of vast riches awaiting Brandt, the Buccaneer, and his men, another vessel stood slowly in toward the little basin, or harbor.

It was a small, armed vessel, with a crew of half a hundred on board, and near her wheel stood her officers, closely watching the approach to the island.

"You are sure that this is the island, senors?" asked one who appeared to be the commander, addressing two men who stood by his side.

"Yes, captain! One who has once seen this island can never mistake it," answered one.

"See! there is the wreck of the *Sea Serpent*!" suddenly cried the other, pointing to a reef close inshore, upon which could certainly be seen the much-shattered wreck of a vessel.

"Then there can be no mistake; so I will at once get the boats out ahead and tow in, for even in this light wind it would not be safe to go in under sail," said the captain.

"I only hope that we will find the treasure all right," said one of the junior officers, with some doubt in his tones.

"There can be no doubt of it, senor, if all is as you say it was."

"We have told the truth, captain."

"We were seamen on yonder wrecked vessel, under Brandt, the Buccaneer, and he sought this island to get the treasure of Merle Monte, the condemned midshipman, and was wrecked."

"The chief and ourselves were all that were saved, and the daring pilot who wrecked us, and who proved to be a woman, revenging herself upon Brandt, set us adrift from the island."

"Brandt wished to return and take the chances against her, and this midshipman and his slave, but we would not consent, threw him into the sea, and only after a long time were we able to find in you a man who believed our story, and who had pluck enough to seize a craft and come with us to find the treasure."

"Then we may have to fight this woman pilot and some others?"

"Yes, captain, if she spoke truly in saying that Merle Monte and his slave were alive."

"But three, then?"

"Only three."

"Ah! we can soon get rid of them."

"Now order out the boats and we will tow in and see what our fortune is to be."

The order of the captain was at once obeyed, three boats being ordered out ahead with tow-lines, and slowly the vessel moved into the basin, gliding by sunken reefs, which, had the sea been ruffled by a breeze of four knots, would have dashed her to pieces.

"By heaven! some other vessel has been here, and lately!" cried one of the two officers, as he sprung ashore and noted many tracks and the marks of boats' cut-waters in the soft sand of the beach.

All turned pale who heard this announcement, and quickly they spread themselves over the island to make a thorough search.

It did not take them long to make a discovery that none cared to make.

It was the post, with the iron box upon the top of it, and by it, where the chief had dashed them down, the letter from Merle Monte, the manacles, rope and black flag left for him.

Thunderstruck, the crew of the little vessel stood looking at each other.

What they found, in connection with the empty cavern near by from which had been recently removed the treasure, proved that vast riches had been stored there.

And also it was clear that some one had been there, and who but Brandt the Buccaneer himself, he having escaped in some miraculous way.

If so, he had gone after the *Gold Ship* without doubt, and why should they not do the same and with equal chance of capturing her?

"Well, senors?"

The captain knew his men when he calmly asked the question in those two words, as to what was to be done, for instantly the cry arose in deadly earnest:

"In the wake of the *Gold Ship* we follow!"

"So be it, senors."

"Now to our boats, and the *Gold Hunter*, as we shall name our vessel, shall at once set sail in search of the *Gold Ship*."

And half an hour after the pretty little cruiser has started upon her cruise for gold.

CHAPTER XI.

A PLOT FOR REVENGE.

AGAIN to The Retreat, the home of Basil Branch on the banks of the Mississippi river, I carry my kind reader, and present him to the two inmates of that once lordly mansion.

The years that had passed, and been spent by the master of The Retreat in squandering his own and his wife's fortunes, had made themselves felt in many ways.

First, the old mansion here and there showed signs of neglect, while the fences had tumbled down and the lawn, flower-garden and walks had become weed-grown.

In spite of their living like hermits, away from the world, the grandfather and father of Basil Branch had had pride in their home and its surroundings, and the estate had been well kept up and paid them a handsome revenue.

But the grandson and son, with the life of his father upon his hands, had become reckless, drank and gambled to drown thought and with a wife and daughter who loved him devotedly, had step by step gone down the hill of life toward inevitable ruin.

The lands had been sold, that had belonged to his wife, and the slaves had followed, while the money thus received had been lost at the gaming table.

The mortgage after mortgage had been put upon The Retreat, until, failing to get more money thus, the slaves had been sold one by one, until only a handful remained, and they too old to bring any price.

Thus matters stood in the home of Basil Branch, when he went to sea with Brandt, the Buccaneer, to recuperate his fallen fortunes, and, a father's slayer, a fitting companion for the pirates he herded with.

And at home he left a wife, sad-faced, for her heart, almost broken, seemed to look out of her eyes, yet still beautiful, and a daughter, just budding into maidenhood, lovely in face, and pure in character as an angel.

It had been a sad parting with the father and husband, the daughter and mother had had; but he had said it would be for the good of all, and that he would forever give up the fascination of the gaming table, and they had consented to the separation.

For some little time he had been gone, and, in spite of the life of evil he had led sadly was he missed, and fondly was he remembered, when one day a boat pulled up to the plantation landing.

The boat looked as though it might belong to a merchant ship, was rowed by four seamen, and in the stern sat a man of middle age, dressed in citizen's garb, and he it was who sprung ashore at the landing.

He glanced earnestly at the mansion, in the midst of live-oak and orange trees, and with a word to his men to await his return, went on toward the house, along the weed-grown gravel walk.

Upon the broad piazza he saw two persons watching his approach.

They were mother and daughter, who had been pacing up and down the long piazza, gazing out upon the rolling river, and talking of the one then far away.

"Do you recognize him Pearl?" asked Mrs. Branch, as the stranger approached.

"No, mother," answered the young girl, looking fixedly at the visitor, and then she added:

"It is no one that I remember to have seen before."

The stranger soon caught sight of the mother and daughter, and came toward them, hat in hand.

"Is this the Retreat plantation, madam?" he asked politely, addressing Mrs. Branch in French.

"It is, sir."

"The home of Mr. Basil Branch?" he continued.

"Yes, monsieur."

"May I inquire if you are Mrs. Branch?"

"I am, sir, but my husband is absent just now."

"It is from your husband that I come, madam."

"Ah! what of him?" gasped the wife, turning pale, while Pearl asked eagerly:

"Have you seen my father, sir?"

"Yes, ladies, I left Mr. Branch only a few days ago in Galveston, and—"

"Is he ill?" and Mrs. Branch asked the question with a fear and trembling.

"No, madam, but on the contrary is in excellent health and spirits, having succeeded in his

venture, beyond his expectations, and, being unable to come himself, has sent me to come and fetch you to him."

"Here is a note from him that will explain, perhaps."

Mrs. Branch seized the proffered note, and hastily read it aloud.

It was dated at Galveston and ran as follows:

"MY DARLING ANNABEL:

"As I have been most successful in the business that brought me here, and will be compelled to remain an indefinite time, I send a faithful messenger for you and Pearl, thinking that a change of a few months, from life at The Retreat, will do you both good."

"I send you gold for any necessary wants, and Pierre is authorized to obtain passage for you on the Galveston packet, so come at very earliest date to

Your loving husband,

"BASIL."

The tears came into the eyes of the loving wife, as she read these lines, while Pearl fairly danced with joy, at the thought of seeing her father soon, and also at the prospect of leaving the dreary old home for awhile.

"Walk in, sir, and bid your men come to the house and get supper and rest, and we will be ready to accompany you in the morning," said Mrs. Branch, as soon as she found her voice to speak, for hope of a brighter future had welled up in her heart and almost choked her.

"We must start early, madam, as the packet sails at sunset to-morrow," replied the messenger.

But he called to his men, and they became guests in the old mansion that night, and the next day the boat turned its prow back to the city, bearing Mrs. Branch and Pearl, and leaving The Retreat to still greater gloom, with only several old negroes to take care of it.

In safety the boat reached the city, the packet, a large coasting schooner, was boarded, and the mother and daughter were given a comfortable state-room, and sailed away from their home, little dreaming that a deep plot had been laid to ensnare them, that a bitter revenge might be satiated.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLACK SCHOONER.

THE Galveston packet schooner had shaken from her sides the muddy waters of the Mississippi river, and was riding the blue billows of the Gulf of Mexico, her course lying west by north, for the wind was fair for her run to Galveston, when a strange sail was sighted creeping out from inshore.

At the time of which I write, piracy upon the high seas was rapidly becoming a thing of the past, but yet there were a few daring rovers who flaunted their flags to the breeze in southern waters, and these were certainly to be feared.

It being known that Brandt, the Buccaneer, was again afloat, and that a bold West Indian pirate, known as The Marauder, was also cruising in the Gulf, it became the captains of merchant vessels to be most wary upon sighting strange sails, and always to expect dangerous foes.

The Galveston packet had a good captain, who had sailed the Gulf for many long years, and who held a hatred for pirates that was intense.

He had a fast sailer in his schooner, a small but faithful crew, and felt that he was able to outrun almost any vessel that might chase him.

But from his first glance at the strange sail he did not like its appearance.

"That fellow means no good, sir, coming out from inshore," he said to the man known as Pierre, and who had been the messenger to The Retreat for Mrs. Branch and Pearl.

"It is doubtless a coaster, captain," observed Pierre.

"You must be ignorant of the appearance of our coasters, sir, to say yonder craft is like one."

"Why, look at her raking sticks, her low hull, sharp as a razor, and the great spread of her canvas."

"No, sir, yonder craft is a United States cutter, or—"

"Or what, captain?" asked Mrs. Branch, who just then came up.

"Or one of those saucy crafts, madam, that smuggle goods and cheat the Government out of its just revenue," returned the captain, who had most skillfully parried the direct question, for he was about to say to Pierre:

"Or—a pirate!"

"Then we have nothing to fear from the vessel?" said Mrs. Branch.

"Oh, no, madam, and even if it was a red-

handed pirate, the Flyaway, here, can show him a clean pair of heels.

"I'll just dress the craft up in her best, madam, and show you and the young lady how she can travel," and the worthy captain called all hands ahoy to set sail, and soon had the schooner rigged out in all she would carry, for he was anxious to widen the distance between the strange craft and himself, though he did not show any outward anxiety.

As soon as the packet began to set sail, the Black Schooner, as those on the coaster called her, for her hull, masts and spars were painted black, also set sail and came on at a slapping pace in pursuit.

"I thought smugglers ran from vessels, captain, instead of after them," said Mrs. Branch, somewhat anxiously, when she saw this act of the stranger.

"They do, madam; but I see that this is not a smuggler, but one of the United States cutters, and as he seems suspicious of us, we'll just give him a little race," evasively said the good captain.

And on flew the packet, and the Black Schooner in chase, both under a tremendous pressure of canvas, and neither showing any signs of taking in sail, although the wind was steadily rising, and skurrying clouds across the heavens betokened a blow of some severity.

"Well, captain, what do you make that craft out which you are flying from?" asked Pierre, after the chase had continued for some hours, and Mrs. Branch and Pearl had gone into the cabin to supper.

"I make her out just what I at first suspected her of being, and which is no more or less than a bloody pirate," was the blunt reply.

"You are mistaken, captain, for I recognize her now as the United States cutter Fleetwing," returned Pierre.

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Yes, for I was a sailor on board of her."

"Strange you did not recognize her before, as a vessel I have once sailed on I would know leagues away years after."

"She has changed her rig somewhat since I saw her last."

"Well, I'll continue to run from her, for if she was honest, as you assert, she would have shown her colors."

"Anyhow, night will be upon us in half an hour, and a storm, too, then I can dodge her."

Pierre turned away with an anxious look upon his face, for the Black Schooner was gaining very slowly upon the Flyaway, and a storm was certainly brewing, and must break upon the seas by nightfall.

Gradually the sea grew dark, and when Mrs. Branch and Pearl returned to the deck, they found the schooner still holding on rapidly, but under reduced sail, and far astern, against the dark clouds, could barely see the white sails of their pursuer.

Hardly had they been upon deck five minutes, when suddenly there was heard a roaring sound in the air, and then, with terrific fury the storm burst upon the fleet craft, and hurled her over upon her beam-ends.

Loud rung the orders of the captain to his crew to try and bring her back to a level keel; but all to no use, and then came the command: "Axes ahoy! and cut away the masts." It was the only way to save the craft, and quick and hard fell the blows until the crash came, and the tall masts, with their sails and rigging went over the side into the sea.

But though the wreck righted, the hull had been fearfully strained and soon the cry of a leak arose, and so fast did the water pour in that the pumps were useless, and the boats were lowered and all on board at once sought to save their lives by deserting the sinking hull.

Stern, yet humane, the captain stood at his post of duty, and filled the boats, Mrs. Branch and Pierre remaining by his side, awaiting for him to go with them, while Pearl had been already lifted to a seat aft.

But suddenly, without warning, a mighty wave tore the boat away, and off in the dark waters it went, the mother shrieking for her daughter, the daughter crying out to her mother, and the frightened and unruly crew unheeding the command of their brave captain to come back and take them off of the wreck, for they feared to approach it again, lest they should be drawn into the seething vortex when the dismantled hull went down into the depths of the sea.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GOLD SHIP AT SEA.

As trim a craft as ever floated in blue water was gliding serenely along over the waves,

driven by a four-knot breeze, two days after the storm that wrecked the packet schooner Flyaway.

The vessel was a schooner, exceedingly long, very sharp and narrow, and her tall, raking masts were capable of spreading an immense amount of canvas for a craft of her tonnage.

The hull, masts and spars were painted jet-black, though a narrow ribbon of gold encircled the former.

No ports were visible in her bulwarks, yet she carried three pivot guns, mounted high, so as to point over her sides, and they were of large caliber, and gave a broadside of three shots if needed.

A crew of some forty men only were grouped forward, dressed in black, but wearing canvas caps enriched by a band of gold.

Along the bulwarks upon each side were racks of small-arms, from muskets and pistols to cutlasses and boarding pikes, and from stem to stern, deck to mast-head, there was the appearance of a vessel under perfect discipline.

At her peak floated a blood red flag, which had in its center a representation of the schooner, skillfully embroidered in gold thread.

Upon the quarter-deck of this pretty and mysterious craft were four persons.

One was a man at the wheel, and an ordinary seaman, while the three others deserve more than passing attention.

He who seemed by dress and appearance the commander, was a youth of apparently eighteen years of age, though there was a certain dignity of bearing and sternness of manner about him, which made him appear older.

He possessed a tall form, elegant in every pose, full of leonine grace, and indicative of great strength, to judge by the broad, massive shoulders and well-knit limbs.

His face was of womanly beauty in repose, but lighted up with fire and enthusiasm at the slightest word, which changed it to that of a man who would do and dare any danger.

He was dressed in a suit of black pants and jacket, trimmed with gold lace, and wore a white cap, encircled by a band of pure gold, while upon either shoulder was embroidered in gold thread a miniature representation of the schooner upon whose deck he stood.

Near him was a youth of slender form, graceful and willowy in movement, and who possessed a face that was simply perfect in outline of feature, though the eyes were full of sadness.

He was attired in a suit similar to that worn by the other, except that he wore only upon his left shoulder the gold-embroidered schooner.

Leaning over the taffrail, gazing with seeming interest at the snowy wake left by the schooner, was the fourth person upon the quarter-deck.

At the first glance at this person one would have said he was almost a human monster, for he had an extremely long body, short, stout legs, arms out of all proportion in length, a massive head, and feet and hands of remarkable size. He was also as black as ink, and his face was one of striking ugliness, unless one looked him squarely in the eyes, when his features were in repose, and in them he could see much that was attractive, for their expression was really tender and full of warm-heartedness; but in anger they would glitter like fire, and express hate and ferocity in a wonderful degree, which made the man seem more like a hyena than a human being.

This strange creature was attired in full Persian costume, turban and all of the costliest materials, and wore at his belt a pair of pistols and a large cimeter, the butts and hilt of which were studded with precious stones of great value.

In the vessel and persons thus described, my reader has before him the Treasure Schooner; her master, Merle Monte, the Condemned Midshipman; Mezrak, the Faithful, his Abyssinian slave; and the woman, once the wife of Brandt, the Buccaneer, but deserted and wronged by him, become a Nemesis, and known on the Gold Ship only as Little Belt, the first lieutenant.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WRECK.

"WRECK HO!"

The cry rung out in sailor-like tones from the mast-head of the Gold Ship, as the Treasure Schooner was called by her young captain and crew.

Wrecked on the Treasure Island by Little Belt, in her disguise as Black Diamond, the negro lad, and his life and that of Mezrak saved by the woman, Merle Monte, when she told him that she had let Brandt, the Buccaneer, go

free, that some day she might bring him to the gallows, had known that his treasure, the riches he had inherited from his parents, and which were buried in a rocky cavern of the isle, were not safe, and hence he had gone to Havana, and purchased the swift and stanch craft, upon the deck of which he is presented to the reader.

With a picked crew on board he had gone to the Treasure Island, put his vast riches in the hold and set sail, with no port in view, no nation's flag at his peak, a fugitive from his own Government, condemned, hunted and an outlaw.

For several weeks he had been sailing about the Gulf, chased now and then by cruisers, shunning all vessels, and listlessly letting the days glide by.

When from the mast-head, therefore, came the cry of—

"Wreck ho!"

—he had started and quickly hailed the lookout with:

"A wreck, you say, n. man?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Whereaway?"

"Dead in our course, sir."

"She is not yet visible from the deck, so report her well, m. man."

"She is a fair-sized hull, sir, with masts blown or cut away, and is drifting broadside to the wind and ying low in the water."

"Ay, ay," answered Merle Monte; and he said no more for some time, and then hailed the masthead again:

"Ho, aloft there!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Anything new to report?"

"The wreck is plainly visible now, sir."

"Do you see any one on board?"

"No, sir."

Again came a silence, and then the wreck became visible to those on the decks, and Merle Monte, after regarding it an instant, called out:

"Ho, the mast-head!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Is not that a man standing near the wheel on the wreck?"

The lookout glanced fixedly at the wreck for a moment, and then answered:

"No, sir; it is a woman."

"A woman?"

The cry came from the lips of both Merle Monte and Little Belt.

"Yes, sir."

Merle Monte turned to the black and said simply:

"My glass, Mezrak."

Instantly the black disappeared in the cabin and returned with a spyglass, gold-mounted and with the bands studded with gems.

Turning it upon the wreck, after a moment Merle said:

"It is a woman, and I see no one else on board."

"She is waving to us now, and— Ah, there comes a man from the cabin—ay, and another."

"But they seem to be all on board."

"Now they all wave to us, for the wreck is drifting beyond our course, and they fear we may not see them."

"Will you board the wreck?" quietly asked Little Belt.

"Humanity demands it, though I care not to do so."

"I am glad that you will, for it seems to be steadily settling in the water, and may soon go down."

"True; we will not pass them by."

"Helmsman, keep her off for the wreck."

"Ay, ay, sir," and falling off a few points, the schooner pointed directly for the wreck, which maneuver brought a shout of joy from the three persons visible on board that was distinctly heard by those on the Gold Ship.

A short half-hour and the Gold Ship was skillfully rounded to under the stern of the wreck, and it was but a moment more before the three persons on the slowly sinking hull were safe upon the deck of the schooner.

Need it be said that they were Mrs. Branch, the man Pierre and the honest old captain of the unfortunate schooner?

In a few words their story was told, while all three could not but gaze with strange feelings of curiosity and admiration commingled, upon the mysterious looking craft and her equally mysterious officers and crew.

"And you are all that were saved?" asked Merle kindly.

"Oh no," answered the wrecked schooner's captain.

"There were more then?"

"Yes, two boat-loads which held thirty-one

persons, nine of whom were passengers of the lower class.

"This lady, her daughter and this gentleman, were my first cabin passengers; but unfortunately a wave broke the boat loose, while we were going in, and my cowardly crew would not return for us."

"And the lady's daughter?" asked Little Belt with deep interest.

"Was in the boat which we intended to take."

"And you fear the boats have gone down?" Merle asked, with sympathy in his tones.

"One may have done so; but when daylight came we saw the other picked up by a passing vessel."

"And did that one contain your daughter, madam?" inquired Merle.

"Thank God it did, sir, and the captain tells me he knows the craft as a well-known packet running into New Orleans," answered Mrs. Branch fervently.

"Then your daughter is safe, madam, and it will give me pleasure to land you wherever you may desire," said Merle.

"I thank you, sir, from my inmost heart."

"I was going to Galveston to join my husband, he having sent this gentleman after myself and daughter; but, as we are near the mouth of the river, and my daughter has doubtless been taken up to the city in the packet, I will be glad if you will place me on board some coaster going up, as I will not trouble you to do more, unless you are on your way to New Orleans?"

"No, madam, my schooner is a havenless craft, and we never enter any port; but I will, with pleasure, place you all on board some coaster going up the river, and, if you will allow me to supply you with gold, as you must have lost all, I will be delighted to do so."

Merle spoke sadly, yet with the courtly grace habitual to him, and the three gazed upon him with wonder, for they could not fathom who this strange youth could be, that so freely offered his gold, and commanded a havenless craft by his own confession.

They glanced at the flag at the peak, but it fathomed not the secret, and the vessel, the crew, its officers, all led them to feel that they had come across some strange mystery of the seas.

CHAPTER XV.

THWARTING TREACHERY.

On glided the Gold Ship, after shaping her course for the Mississippi Delta, and several hours after the coming on board of the three persons from the wreck, the lookout cried in his clear tones:

"Boat ho!"

"A boat, say you, my lad?" asked Merle.

"Ay, ay, sir."

"A boat thus far from land can only be one of those that left my schooner," remarked the captain of the lost Flyaway eagerly.

"True, Captain Trenor, it must be either your boat, or one of some other wrecked vessel," and raising his voice, Merle continued:

"Ho aloft!"

"Ay, ay, the deck!"

"What do you make of the boat?"

"A ship's long boat, sir, with a score of men in it."

"My long boat, I'll wager, for she had just twenty men in it, all of my crew, with my mate, excepting four seamen, who went in the cutter with the passengers," cried the captain.

"Whereaway do you sight her, my lad?" called out Merle.

"Three points off the port bow, sir."

"Ay, ay!"

"Head the schooner for the boat, helmsman," and at once the vessel's course was trained.

Soon after the boat becoming visible to those on the deck of the Gold Ship, the Captain of the Flyaway pronounced it to be his long boat and crew.

On sped the schooner, and the cheers of those in the boat were vehement and constant, when they saw help at hand.

At last the schooner luffed up, the boat came alongside, and a wild hurrah broke from the lips of the rescued mariners, when they beheld their captain safe on the deck of the vessel which had picked them up.

As they were not the ones who had deserted him to his fate, having been first away, and believed him to have gotten off in the cutter, the captain had no reproaches, but said simply:

"My lads, I have no ship now; but if you wish to do duty with this brave young captain, until he sets us ashore, you can do so."

The men gladly consented, but Merle Monte declined their services, and held on with all

speed for the Mississippi's mouth, for he was anxious to get rid of so many strangers on his vessel.

"I say, captain, a word with you," said Pierre, addressing the commander of the Flyaway, and calling him to one side in a confidential way.

"Well, sir, what is it?" asked Captain Trenor bluntly, for he had never particularly fancied his passenger, though why he could not account for.

"Don't you think this a very mysterious craft, Captain Trenor?" asked Pierre.

"That is evident, sir."

"And her commander is another mystery?"

"Yes, sir."

"My opinion is that she is just starting out for a pirate."

"I do not agree with you, sir."

"Well, I am confident in my opinion, and I deem it our duty to seize her."

"Seize her?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean, Mr. Pierre Dupont?"

"I mean, Captain Trenor, that we should seize her, for you have twenty men, your mate, and with you and I there are twenty-three of us."

"The schooner has a larger force, I admit; but when one watch is below, we can close the hatches upon them, seize what arms we need and carry the vessel without trouble, as it is our duty to do."

Captain Trenor heard the man through, and then said with evident anger:

"Look here, Mr. Pierre Dupont, I do not know what honor you may have, but, as for myself, I am no man to be a traitor to one who has saved my life, be he pirate or smuggler, and, instead of siding in your base plot, I will frankly tell you, sir, that were this vessel attacked by an enemy I would help defend her to the bitter end, and, if captured, take the consequences of my act like a man."

With a contemptuous toss of the head Captain Trenor turned away from the man who had plotted treachery against those who had saved him from death, and going aft joined Merle, to whom he had taken a great fancy, though who he was, or what was his vessel he could not for the life of him make out.

CHAPTER XVI.

BITTER TIDINGS.

ARRIVING off the Balize, after night had fallen, the Gold Ship, under orders from Merle Monte, stood off and on on easy tacks and under light canvas, to await the running in of some vessel bound up to the city.

It was after midnight when a sail was sighted, and instantly the schooner was put away to head her off.

Seeing that the Gold Ship could do this, and suspecting her rakish rig, the stranger suddenly put about, spread all sail and stood back for deep water, to endeavor to escape.

As the craft was evidently a coaster, Merle gave chase, while he remarked to Captain Trenor:

"As all vessels that are not cruisers will without doubt run from us, I shall overhaul that craft and place you on board with your two passengers and crew."

"I thank you, sir, but you have a nimble-footed fellow to catch," replied Captain Trenor, gazing after the flying vessel.

"True, sir; he does skim along most swiftly; but I will set more sail and see if he can hold his own."

Orders were at once given to spread more canvas, and under its increased weight the Gold Ship fairly flew over the waters, urged on by a ten-knot breeze.

The craft ahead, and distant half a league, was now seen to spread every stitch of sail that would draw, but it was evident she could not shake off the persistent pursuer upon her track, and which steadily gained upon her, though as yet Merle had not set all of his canvas.

At last, anxious that the vessel should not run too far away, and being within range of his bow pivot, Merle gave orders to throw a shot over the stranger as a hint for him to heave to.

The gun he aimed himself, and the shot went flying just over her decks, and instantly she ran up into the wind and hove to.

Then, when the schooner came near, the coaster was signaled to send a boat aboard, and a frank-faced seaman soon stood upon the decks of the Gold Ship.

"Are you the skipper of the schooner?" asked Merle.

"I am, sir."

"You seemed to be afraid of us," said Merle, with a smile.

"I am yet," was the laconic response.

"Well, I will relieve your mind by telling you that I am not a pirate and mean you no harm."

"I am glad to hear that; but this is a dangerous-looking craft to run across, and I must say you have a mysterious appearance all round."

"Are you the captain?"

"I am the commander of the schooner, sir, and having picked up some shipwrecked people, I will pay you well to give them passage to New Orleans, whither you are doubtless bound."

"Yes; I am out of Pensacola, and was making Orleans when you caused me to put about; but I will take the shipwrecked people up to the city with pleasure and without pay; for I want no man's gold when he is unfortunate."

"Well said, captain; but I am most willing to pay you well for your trouble."

"It is no trouble, sir, to aid those in misfortune; but, as you have a good craft here, well armed and fairly manned, I think you had better give that sea devil, Brandt the Buccaneer, a chase."

"Ha! what know you of Brandt, the Buccaneer?" quickly asked Merle.

"I know enough to hang him, for he boarded and robbed me once; but it was before I got the Gipsy there, which can show her heels now, even to a pirate craft, though you have got a flyer here that overhauled her," and the skipper looked with admiration over the beautiful vessel.

"Yes, my schooner is very fast, and as stanch and true as she is fleet; but what have you to say about Brandt the Buccaneer of late?"

"I have to say that he is these waters."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, and he is going to make many captures, as many begun to believe that he was dead, as it has been so reported."

"But how know you that he is not?"

"Because he is now in command of a fleet brig out of New Orleans?"

"It certainly is, sir."

"Did he cut her out and run off with her?" asked Merle, while Mrs. Branch and all listened with great interest for the response.

"No, sir, he did better than that."

"Pray tell us all you know of this infamous sea rover's latest deeds of devilry?"

The question was asked by Little Belt, but though she spoke calmly, she was trembling with excitement.

"Well, gentlemen, I spoke the Mobile packet brig, Alabama, early last night, and her captain is my brother, and wanted a few extra spars of me."

"I ordered them sent on board, and had a chat with my brother, who told me that a lugger had come to the city with the passengers of the New Orleans and Galveston packet brig Montezuma on board."

"Oh, sir! had ought happened to the brig?" cried Mrs. Branch, eagerly, and Merle made a sign to the skipper to forbear telling any evil tidings; but he did not see it, and said bluntly:

"I should think so, when she was seized by pirates."

Mrs. Branch gave a low moan, and tried to speak, but could utter no word, and Merle cried quickly:

"Captain, tell us all you know of the capture of the brig, as this lady's husband was a passenger on board."

"Ah! I am sorry to have given her pain! but hope all will come well with him, as the passengers and crew were put on a lugger by Brandt and sent to Orleans."

"By Brandt?"

"Yes, young captain, for he took the brig."

"It seems, as I heard the story, the brig picked him up at sea, some time ago, with a broken arm, and they all took the best of care of him, one of the officers giving up his state-room to him."

"But they nursed a snake back to life, for he lay in his berth, while the brig was in port, and shipped a crew of cutthroats, at whose head he placed himself, when the brig was on her voyage, and seized her."

"There was a short fight, they say, and a few men killed; but Brandt got the brig, and though he set the crew and passengers free, he kept the very officer who had befriended him, and threatened to kill him; but that is his character, as I know it."

"Then Brandt, the Buccaneer, is again afloat?"

"Yes, and in a good craft, too."

"Oh! Captain Monte, it was one of the Gal

veston packets that we saw pick up the other boat from our vessel," and Mrs. Branch turned her face, white as that of a corpse, upon Merle Monte, who asked of Captain Trenor if it was the Montezuma.

"As far as I could judge in the distance, sir, it was the Montezuma," was the sad reply.

"Oh, God! my child is in the power of that monster of the sea," and Mrs. Branch sunk upon the deck in a swoon.

But, under restoratives, she quickly rallied, and grasped the hands of Merle, who was bending anxiously over her, while Little Belt and Captain Trenor stood near.

"Captain Monte," she cried, in piteous tones, "are you bound on any special voyage?"

"No, madam."

"You have an armed vessel and good crew?"

"I have, madam."

"Then, sir, in the name of Heaven, by the memory of the mother who gave you birth, I implore you to set sail in pursuit of that man, and let me go with you."

"My husband may have been among those who were killed when the pirate seized the brig, or he may be now in his power; but the vessel that took up the boat in which was my poor child was, we now know, the brig, and even then in the hands of Brandt, the Buccaneer."

"In giving chase to that demon, and capturing him, you will do the world great service, and you will give back to a mother's arms her only child."

She spoke in tones that went straight to the heart of Merle Monte, and at once his mind was made up, and he answered:

"Mrs. Branch, for my own sake, as well as yours, I will go in chase of Brandt, the Buccaneer."

"God forever bless you, Captain Monte."

"And I, sir, having no vessel now, will enlist with you as a seaman, and feel that my crew will do likewise, and this will give you three-score good men and true," said Captain Trenor, earnestly.

At once Merle grasped his hand, and replied:

"You are a true man, Captain Trenor, and I accept your offer, and promise you that in case we capture Brandt, the Buccaneer, that you and your men shall have every dollar of the reward offered for him, and the prize-money, for my crew will be content without."

"Now, sir, you are my second lieutenant, next to Lieutenant Little Belt, and within ten minutes the schooner shall turn her prow in pursuit of Brandt, the Buccaneer."

Going on deck, Merle found the crew of the wrecked schooner more than willing to follow the lead of their captain and enlist on board the Gold Ship in so good a cause, and as even Pierre Dupont also volunteered, the skipper and his vessel went on to New Orleans without his expected passengers, and carrying a handsome souvenir from Merle for the delay and trouble he had put him to.

CHAPTER XVII.

ADrift ON THE SEA.

WHEN the boat, which held Pearl Branch and the half dozen other passengers and several seamen, was dragged away from the schooner, it was a bitter blow to the young girl, who was thus torn from her mother's side.

In piteous tones she pleaded with the men at the oars to return to the wreck for her mother, their captain and Pierre Dupont.

But they were deaf to her entreaties, and the coxswain in charge answered firmly:

"We would like to oblige you, miss, but we run the risk of being dashed to pieces against the wreck, and it may go down at any moment."

"And my mother will be lost?" moaned the maiden.

"She might not go down, miss, and if not we'll pick her up; but not the others, for the boat is full now."

And this was all that Pearl could get from the men, who, soon tiring of waiting near the wreck, let it go on with the wind and waves.

It was a fearful night upon the dark storm-swept waters, and poor Pearl bitterly mourned for her mother, and seemed to even prefer death, to living in the cold world without.

But with the daylight all felt better, and hoped that the wreck had not gone down, and that some vessel would pass near and discover them.

And thus the little boat drifted about here and there, until at last the coxswain, whose eyes were continually searching the horizon, sprung to his feet with the ringing words:

"Sail ho."

Every voice gave a cry of joy, and all eyes swept around the horizon, and soon, far, very far away, was visible a tiny sail.

Breathlessly all watched to see how she was heading, and another wave of joy rolled over them, when the coxswain said:

"She comes this way, and her course will bring her within hail."

Long they waited, while the vessel rose above the horizon rapidly, and came on toward them at a swift pace.

"It is a brig," said one of the passengers.

"Yes, and I know her," answered the coxswain.

"What is she?" was asked.

"She belongs to the Galveston Packet Line, but is out of her bearings, I should think, so far south."

"Perhaps blown off by the storm," suggested one.

"Doubtless; but it's the Montezuma I can swear, so that we are all right, as she will pass within a quarter of a mile of us."

"Do you think the wreck yet floats, sir?" asked Pearl in low, earnest tones.

"To tell you the truth, miss, I do not, for I think it went down within an hour after we left it."

"You better know the truth, miss, at once," said the coxswain kindly, though he little dreamed that even then the wreck, and the three on board, were within a few leagues of them.

But then the hull lay low in the water, and wholly dimasted it was not visible any great distance off.

Nearer and nearer approached the brig, and, to attract the attention of those on board, the coxswain placed a mantilla handed him by Pearl, upon an oar, and waved it about.

"They do not see it."

"They will pass us."

"Let us all raise our voices and hail together!"

"Oh Heaven! she is going by!"

Such were the words that fell from the lips of the anxious ones, and, at a signal from the coxswain, all raised their voices in one long, loud hail.

"Ho the brig! ahoy!"

Breathlessly they watched to see the result, and instantly a cry broke from every throat, for there was a tall form seen to spring upon the bulwarks, and almost immediately the sharp bows of the brig changed their course and pointed for the little boat.

"We are saved!"

The words came from the lips of the coxswain, and all on board uttered a fervent:

"Thank God!"

No, not all, for Pearl sat with her face buried in her hands, and her thoughts were not with herself, but down in the depths of the sea, where she believed her mother was then resting.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

"Ho the boat!"

The hail was in the deep tones of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and he stood on the bulwarks of the brig Montezuma, or rather Huntress, as he had named her, and gazed down upon the little boat, pulling so eagerly for the side of his vessel, all so joyous with the thought that they were saved.

"Ay, ay, sir!" called back the coxswain.

"What boat is that?"

"The cutter of the New Orleans and Galveston Packet Flyaway, wrecked in the late storm."

"Ay, ay, come alongside."

The wrecked mariners were a little dampened by their reception, but were soon clambering up the sides of the brig, and reaching the deck were met by none other than the noted pirate chief himself, and by whose side stood Basil Branch.

The last one to leave the boat, excepting the coxswain, for she had seemed dazed, was Pearl, and almost mechanically she went over the gangway.

She was very pale, her face had a worn look of suffering, and her long and luxuriant hair had fallen about her like a mantle; but when the eyes of Brandt, the Buccaneer, fell upon her, he started with surprised admiration and muttered:

"Ha! there is loveliness such as an angel might possess."

"I will myself welcome her."

But suddenly there came a wild cry, and Basil Branch bounded forward.

"Good God! Pearl, my child, you here!"

All were amazed, as he seized the maiden in

his arms, and drew her head upon his breast, while she, recognizing her father, burst into tears of commingled joy and sorrow, for though finding him, she had lost her mother.

"Pearl, speak! tell me why I find you here, when I left you at The Retreat with your mother?" urged Basil Branch, earnestly.

"Take your daughter to the cabin, Branch, where she will feel more herself," said Brandt, the Buccaneer, in a tone of kindness, and the father, livid, trembling, led the daughter away, while the chief turned to the coxswain, when he had departed, and said:

"Well, my man, as we get you from the sea, it is but fair that we give you welcome, and make you comfortable."

"But the first vessel we capture, I will put you on board to make your way to your homes."

"The first vessel you capture?" asked the coxswain in surprise, standing in the midst of them who had been in the boat with him.

"So I said, my man."

"Is not this the Montezuma brig?"

"Yes."

"But you are not her former captain, sir?"

"No, she has changed captains and crews," was the significant reply.

"And you are—"

"Brandt, the Buccaneer," was the unblinking response.

"Good God!"

It came in chorus from the lips of the rescue, as all turned white with dread, and started back in horror.

"You seem amazed that I, wanting a vessel, for I was without one, should have seized the Montezuma."

"But I have done so, and having named her the Huntress, I intend to cruise for riches, as I have been very unfortunate of late."

"As you come to me a wrecked crew, I will treat you well, and place you on board the first vessel I capture, and when you return to the city, tell the good folk that Brandt, the Buccaneer, is again afloat."

"Mr. Vernon, cast that boat adrift, and when you have gotten the brig under way again, look after the comfort of these people," said Brandt, addressing an under officer, and then turning coolly on his heel he walked aft, and stood near the companionway. As he did so he heard Pearl speak in low, plaintive tones:

"A lovely girl that, and with a voice as soft as a flute."

"But what is his daughter doing at sea, when he told me he left his wife and child at home?"

"That is the child, eh?"

"A child woman, she is, and one who would win my heart, and I will make my bride, when I have found Merle Monte and his treasure."

"Ha! what is that?"

The chief drew nearer, for he had overheard words spoken by Basil Branch, who had said:

"Pearl, my poor child, this sad death of your poor mother almost crushes me with grief; but be brave, be strong, for I have that to tell you, which cannot be avoided, as now you are here on this vessel."

"Oh, father! is there more sorrow for me?" moaned the maiden.

"Branch, one moment, please!" cried Captain Brandt down the companionway.

"I will come presently, captain."

"No, come now," was the stern reply.

"My child, I will soon return," said Basil Branch, and kissing her tenderly he ascended to the deck.

Brandt, the Buccaneer, confronted him, and said in a hoarse whisper:

"Branch, I overheard your words, which meant a confession to that young and pure child, of who her father was."

"Are you a fool, to break her young heart thus?"

"But, Captain Brandt, she has come on board this vessel, and the secret cannot be kept from her, or God knows I would not let her know that her father is more vile than she has believed him, for she knew that I was a gambler," said the unfortunate man in earnest tones.

"I will arrange that for her."

"Tell her that this is the merchant craft she believes it to be, and I will at once run on a course that will catch some coaster, and put the others who were in the boat with her on board of it, while you can be put upon another vessel, bound to New Orleans, and carry her back to her home, and rejoin me at some point."

"Brandt, from my inmost heart I thank you for this, for it takes a fearful load from my heart."

"I love my child more than all else in the world, though I have beggared her; but I will get riches for her, though she knows not how,

and yet let her become an heiress and a queen among women."

"And your wife—what of her?" asked Brandt.

"Come with me into the cabin and hear the strange story that Pearl tells.

"There is some foe on my path, Brandt, who has done me a great wrong.

"Come! I will introduce you as Captain Brentford," and the two descended to the cabin together.

CHAPTER XIX.

BRANDT'S GAME FOR EVIL.

A BEAUTIFUL picture, in spite of her grief, Pearl presented to the eyes of Brandt, the Buccaneer, when he entered the cabin with her father.

"Pearl, my child, this is the commander of the vessel, Captain Brentford, and I wish you to tell him also the story which you made known to me."

Pearl bowed low, but Brandt walked forward and took her hand, an act which brought a frown to the face of her father.

"My dear young lady," the pirate said, in the soft, insinuating way he knew so well how to assume.

"My deepest sympathy you have in the misfortune that has come upon you; but here you shall be shielded from all dangers and suffering."

"I thank you, sir; and I could be perfectly happy now if poor, poor mamma was with us," said Pearl, in a voice that quivered with emotion.

"She went down with the vessel, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, we left her upon the wreck, and all my entreaties and offers of gold would not make the crew return for her and the two others."

"Tell the captain, Pearl, how it is that I find you here and hear of your mother's sad death, when I believed you both in safety at The Retreat."

"Well, father, I can tell you all in a few words.

"Some days ago mother and myself were upon the piazza of The Retreat, when a boat landed and a gentleman advanced and told us that he came from you.

"In fact, he gave mother a letter, which certainly appeared to be in your handwriting.

"It told us that the messenger, Mr. Pierre Dupont, would take us to you, and he gave mother gold for certain purchases which she wished to make, saying that you had sent it to her."

"This all astounds me, captain, as you must know!" cried Basil Branch.

Brandt merely bowed, and Pearl continued.

"Without the slightest suspicion of wrong we went with the man and found our passage already engaged on one of the smaller vessels of the Galveston line.

"When out in the Gulf we sighted a sail, which Captain Trenor stated was a pirate craft, but which the man Pierre asserted was a revenue cutter.

"We escaped it after a hot chase in the storm and the darkness, but our vessel was dismasted and reported sinking by the carpenter, and we were forced to take to the boats.

"In one went three-fourths of the crew, and in the other were the passengers, four seamen, the coxswain and myself, and this one was also to carry my mother, the captain and Pierre.

"But a savage wave broke the boat loose from the wreck, leaving the captain, Pierre and my mother upon it, and in vain was it that I appealed to the men to return," and Pearl, overcome by the bitter remembrance, burst into tears.

For awhile no word was spoken, and then Basil Branch broke the silence with:

"Now, captain, what does all this mean?"

"I am at a loss to understand it, Branch; but it is certainly the act of some foe."

"Assuredly, but who?"

"Can you not think of some one?"

"None who would thus run off with my wife and child."

"What was the appearance of this man Pierre, Miss Branch?" asked Brandt, in his courtly way.

Pearl dried her tears and said:

"A man of striking appearance, and certainly a sailor, for Captain Trenor said so.

"He was about the age of my father, had a full beard and dark, earnest eyes, though I never liked his face, for it did not seem either sincere or good."

"Pierre, you say his name was, Pearl?"

"Yes, father."

"Captain, do you remember my telling you

I shipped for you a man by the name of Pierre, and with whom I was so much pleased I promised him the berth of boatswain?" asked Basil Branch.

"Yes, I recall the circumstance, and that the man did not appear."

"True, and he was just such a man as Pearl has described."

"Then he must be your enemy; but come, let me have a talk with you about what is best to be done, and Miss Branch, permit me to say that the cabin is wholly at your service."

Brandt left the cabin then, followed by his lieutenant, who asked, when they had gained the deck:

"Well, you have something to propose?"

"I have."

"I will be governed by you, for I believe you to be my friend."

"I am indeed, Branch, and of your sweet daughter, and deeply do I feel for you both in your affliction.

"The dead you cannot restore, and the living are to be cared for, so my plan is—"

"Sail ho!"

"The cry came from the mast-head.

"Ay, ay, I see her, and you must have been blind not to have done so before, sir.

"Have your eyes about you, my man, or I'll have thy sight improved by an application of the 'cat,'" and Brandt spoke angrily.

"You see that vessel?" he continued, turning again to Basil Branch.

"Yes, she is not three leagues off."

"And is making all haste to keep that distance."

"But she is a coaster, that is evident, and heads for Galveston, doubtless, so we will give chase, and not come up with her until night.

"Then, when your daughter is asleep, I will send those who were in the boat with her quietly on board yonder craft, and tell her we would not disturb her, when she awakes in the morning, if she thinks strange of it, for I do not wish one suspicion to be aroused.

"Then I can put you and your child on another coaster, and you can go to the city with her, and as I said, rejoin me.

"I am not rich, Branch, for my losses of late have been great, as you know, but I always carry about me a few gems of great value, and several of these you shall have, so that you can leave your daughter above want, for I know you were on your last legs, financially, when you came with me."

"I was, indeed, Brandt, or I never would have taken such a step."

The pirate chief smiled grimly, but continued:

"I will wait at a point in Barrataria Bay for your return, and you can charter a small lugger, and bring back with you certain things we need, and also about two-score more men, for I will have a large crew, and not be caught again."

"There is no need of it, surely, for the Huntress is very fast, the guns you took from your old wreck are good ones, and we should be able to hold our own even with a large cruiser," returned Basil Branch.

"We will; but my object is simply to defend myself, as my aim is Merle Monte and his treasure, which is afloat, as he told me, you know, to hunt him on the high seas in his *Gold Ship*.

"Ay, that will I hunt him, and find him too, and then, Basil Branch, we will have the wealth of princes.

"Now, go to your daughter, and keep her in the cabin, and to-night I will get rid of the boat's crew."

And, true to his word, late that night Brandt, the Buccaneer, overhauled the vessel ahead, and sent the shipwrecked crew on board.

"But the young lady, sir?" asked the coxswain.

"The young lady shall remain on board with her father, who is my prisoner, to go free only when I receive from him a certain ransom I demand," was the cool reply.

"God have mercy upon them both," bluntly responded the coxswain.

"Into that boat, sir, or you will need prayers for yourself," sternly ordered the buccaneer, and the coxswain quickly obeyed, and soon after the two vessels were sailing away in different courses.

CHAPTER XX.

A DEPARTURE FROM THE GOLD SHIP.

WHEN the *Gold Ship* started upon her cruise after Brandt, the Buccaneer, there was certain-

* Cat-o'-nine-tails.

ly a firm determination upon the part of Merle Monte to run the noted pirate to the death.

He deeply felt for Mrs. Branch in her suspense and sorrow, and hoped to be able soon to restore to her her daughter and her husband, for it will be remembered that the poor wife looked upon Basil Branch as simply a passenger upon the *Montezuma*, with all his faults never dreaming him a pirate.

She had often known him to be sad and gloomy at home, and seen him at times as though he were almost crazed with some secret trouble; but little did she feel that the remorse of having taken from his father the few short hours he had to live, was the canker worm gnawing at his heart.

Dissipated and a gambler she knew him to be, but no more, and these faults had by no means weaned her love from him.

Feeling assured that Captain Brandt would take advantage of the fact, of the *Montezuma* being known as a merchant craft, to capture all the unsuspecting vessels that he could, before the fearful truth became known, Merle decided to look for him in the neighborhood he deemed it most likely to find the buccaneer, so he sailed for the route usually taken by the packet line to and from their ports of destination and departure.

For several days he cruised about, keeping a good lookout at the mast-head, and running down to speak every sail, and ask if the brig had been seen, though frequently he had a chase for it to catch a craft, for the rakish look of the schooner caused her to be shunned as though she were in reality a pirate, and honest tars could not account for her very remarkable appearance.

It was after a half-day's chase one afternoon that the schooner poked her sharp nose almost over the taffrail of a coast-trading craft, which had been making every effort to escape from the supposed pirate, and being a fleet sailor, had held her own very fairly with the *Gold Ship* which was under her lower sails only.

But, instead of running aboard the stranger, Merle simply ordered his helmsman to go to leeward, and keep close enough to throw a rope on board if necessary.

As the schooner forged ahead he saw that the crew of the stranger were all greatly alarmed, and had congregated aft, a dozen in number, and had armed themselves with muskets, cutlasses and pistols.

Merle and his men could not but smile, at the show of resistance made by the little crew, and the young captain hailed with:

"Ho the schooner!"

"Aho the—what the devil are you?" came the blunt reply, which brought a general laugh.

"A cruiser in search of game," said Merle.

"Sailing under an honest flag?" came the bold query.

"Sailing under a flag that has never been stained with dishonor," was the haughty reply.

"I don't know it," and the frank young skipper gazed fixedly at the colors flying from the peak.

"There is a great deal you do not know, my dear captain; but there is one thing I hope you do know."

"What might that be?"

"The present whereabouts of Brandt, the Buccaneer."

"By Jove! I really half thought you were that pirate in a new craft, for the wretch has chased me often, and always, of late years, on a new deck."

"Yes, he has been forced to change his vessels often of late; but have you run across him on this voyage?"

"If he is on the brig folks say he captured, I have not; but if he has a little schooner, well armed and manned, he lies now in one of the inlets of Barrataria."

"How do you know this?"

"I spoke a plantation lugger out of Atchafalaya Bay, whose skipper told me that he saw such an armed craft run in and anchor there."

"Thank you; I will run in and see what this cruiser is."

"I hope I have not driven you far off your course," said Merle, politely.

"If you have, the satisfaction of not finding you a pirate fully repays me."

"But tell me what cruiser you are?"

"Report us as the *Gold Ship*, Merle Monte, the Condemned Midshipman, commander," was the terse reply, and turning, Merle gave an order to his helmsman, and the schooner darted away before the wind, her destination being Barrataria Bay.

A rapid run brought the schooner in sight of the land before night, and going in until about

a league from shore he dropped anchor, and sent a boat in to reconnoiter, for, according to his reckoning, he was very near the inlet where the strange cruiser had been reported to be.

"Muffle your oars, Captain Trenor," he said to that officer, who was to go in charge of the boat, and whom, though his lieutenant, he had always honored with the rank of captain, which he had borne.

"I suppose I can go, too, Captain Monte?"

The speaker was Pierre Dupont, who had seemed rather nervous of late, and he stepped forward, as though to go over the gangway.

"No, sir, the boat has its complement with Captain Trenor and his men," said Merle, somewhat coldly, for, in spite of himself, he did not like the man.

"But I insist upon going, sir," and the man stepped forward as though to carry out his intention.

Instantly Merle let his hand fall upon the shoulder of the man, with a strength that he had not believed the youth capable of.

"Mr. Dupont, when I give an order on my own vessel, I intend to be obeyed, sir."

The face of Pierre Dupont, even in the darkness, and his manner, showed that he fretted under the restraint, and for an instant he appeared as though he would resent the grip upon him and the words; but evidently thinking the better of it, he said, coldly:

"As you please, sir."

Then he turned away, and the boat moved shoreward, the muffled oars giving out no sound.

For several hours it was gone, and eight bells had passed ere Merle Monte, who still held the deck, descried a dark object upon the waters, coming directly toward the schooner.

"Boat ahoy!" he called out in a tone just loud enough to reach those in the boat.

"Ay, ay, Captain Monte," came the reply in the voice of Trenor, and Merle walked to the gangway to receive the officer, and found there Pierre Dupont.

"Well, captain, back again I am glad to see," he said, pleasantly.

"Yes, Captain Monte, and I found the schooner."

"Found her?"

"Yes, sir."

"In shore of course?"

"Yes, sir, lying at anchor in an inlet, the entrance to which is very narrow, but deep."

"The inlet is about half a mile long by half that distance in width, and the shores are wooded heavily."

"She is armed?"

"Yes, sir, and I am confident is not an honest craft."

"How near did you go to her?"

"Within twenty fathoms, sir."

"Thank you."

"At daybreak we will run in and take a look at her," and Merle turned away and walked aft, accompanied by his lieutenant, having given orders to leave the boat alongside for the night.

Hardly had they reached the quarter-deck, when Pierre Dupont, watching his opportunity silently slipped over the side and dropped into the sea with all his clothes on, and the quiet manner in which he accomplished it, was conclusive that he intended to desert the vessel for some cause or other.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

WHILE the shadows of darkness yet rested upon the sea, Merle Monte came on deck, and with the one boat, which Trenor had used in his reconnaissance, out ahead, towed slowly in toward the shore.

His desire was to set no sail until it was absolutely necessary, as the white canvas could be descried a long way off, where the sailless schooner would remain invisible.

The crew were called to the guns, and all was prepared for action, while the men stood ready to set the sails and hoist away the tow-boat aboard at an instant's notice.

Mrs. Branch was upon deck, standing near Little Belt, who had confessed to her her sex, and told the story of her life and found in the grief-haunted lady a true friend and sympathizer.

"Where is Mr. Dupont?" asked Mrs. Branch of Little Belt, as she glanced around the deck in the uncertain light.

"Could he have overslept himself?" responded Little Belt, who failed to recognize the well-known form on deck, and remembered that she had not seen him before that morning.

"Do you know, Little Belt, that I do not like

that man, notwithstanding his goodness to me?" said Mrs. Branch.

"Nor do I like him, Mrs. Branch, and I am certain that Captain Monte mistrusts him."

"I'll speak to him about the absence of Mr. Dupont, at a time when every man should be on deck to do his duty."

When Little Belt spoke to Merle, he at once made a rapid circuit of the vessel, and then went into the cabin in search of the delinquent.

"Captain Trenor, have you seen Dupont this morning?" he asked upon returning to the deck.

"I have not, sir."

"Let the schooner be thoroughly searched for him, Little Belt," ordered Merle, and at once the command was obeyed, but without result.

He had most mysteriously disappeared, and as sterner duties demanded attention just then, Merle Monte devoted himself to them.

The schooner was now almost in to the entrance to the inlet, and darkness was fading from the sea.

"You say there is plenty of water in the inlet, Captain Trenor?"

"Yes, sir."

"And in the channel too?"

"There is, sir, for I sounded as thoroughly as I could."

"Then I shall set sail at once and run in ready to meet the foe."

"I don't see the schooner, sir."

"Nor I, captain; but then the light is obscure, and the background of forest would conceal her."

"All hands ahoy to set sail!"

In a twinkling the schooner had her canvas spread, the boat ahead was called in and hauled up to the davits, and right into the channel leading to the inlet headed the pretty vessel, her men at her guns and all ready for action.

The wind was light, yet the Treasure Schooner was a vessel that could sail well under the pressure of the slightest puff, and pointed well, as she glided along at a three-knot pace.

Into the channel, and thence into the inlet she went.

But it was light enough now to sweep the entire little basin with the eye, and nowhere visible was the strange craft.

It too had mysteriously disappeared.

"Captain Monte?"

"Well, sir?" and Merle turned to Captain Trenor, who had addressed him.

"This is a most mysterious disappearance."

"It is indeed."

"She could not have sailed out last night, without attracting our attention."

"No, for the shoals off our starboard and port would have forced her to come within a few cables length of us, and either you or myself were on watch all night."

"True, sir, and the wind last night was dead into the inlet, though it has since changed, and she would have to stand out by short tacks, and if we had not seen her, we would have heard her."

"Well, what is your opinion, Captain Trenor?"

"That she towed out."

"And mine too, and I connect her disappearance with that of Pierre Dupont."

"It is most mysterious, sir, all round; but, if he left the schooner, he had to swim nearly a league."

"And was the man to do it, when he made up his mind to it."

"I may be wrong, Captain Trenor, but I have doubted that man from the first."

"But let us now set to work to find the schooner, for, with this light wind she cannot be far away, as it was after midnight when you returned, and Dupont was on the schooner then."

After standing across the inlet the schooner put about and started upon her search for the craft that had so mysteriously disappeared.

CHAPTER XXII.

UNFORGOTTEN VOICES AND FACES.

THE search for the schooner proving fruitless, and it becoming necessary for Merle to seek some place in which to procure provisions, he determined to run for Mobile, or rather as near it as he dare take his vessel, and from thence go up the bay to the town in one of the oyster-boats that plied their work in the waters near that port.

Approaching by night, and under the pilotage of Captain Trenor, who had once been in the Mobile trade, the schooner found a secure retreat in a small inlet some miles from the city.

An oyster-boat had been hailed running in, and after a talk in the schooner's cabin with

Merle her skipper was willing to undertake a little work of a secret nature.

"You make a fair living by oystering and fishing, my man; but for the few days that I will need you I will pay you and each one of your few men more than you can earn in a year."

"If I can trust you say so, and if not admit it and go your way."

"But serve me faithfully and I will pay you handsomely."

"I'll do it, if it's square work to be done," answered the skipper.

"I'll tell you what it is."

"I am pirate hunting, and I do not wish my vessel to be reported as being in these waters just now, as it may thwart my ends; so I need your sloop to run up to Mobile and get provisions and other things we need."

"When she is stored with what I purchase I put back to my vessel, and you are free to go."

"But mind you, it must not be known to any one that you are carrying a cargo for me."

"I understand, captain," was the reply; and ten minutes after the sloop was flying across Mobile Bay, and upon her deck stood Merle Monte and Little Belt, both most thoroughly disguised as rough-looking, unkempt-bearded sailors.

It was just dawn when the sloop ran up to her little dock, and Merle and Little Belt went on shore, escorted by the skipper, to get breakfast, after which they were taken to a ship chandler's, where all necessary stores were ordered and promptly paid for, while instructions were given where they should be taken.

"Now, skipper, you get the stores on board, while my friend and myself take a walk about the city," said Merle, and the two friends strolled off together to endeavor to learn something regarding Brandt, the Buccaneer, and his doings.

Entering a coffee-house they took seats in an alcove and ordered dinner.

Just as it was brought to them they heard two men enter the next door, and both Merle and Little Belt started when one of them spoke in giving his orders to the servant.

"That voice is familiar, Little Belt," said Merle.

"Yes, I have heard it before," answered Little Belt, in the same low whisper in which his companion had spoken.

Instantly their dinner was forgotten, and they sat in perfect silence while the two strangers in the next alcove talked on.

What they said was not compromising to them, if heard by an ordinary listener; but to the ears of Merle and Little Belt it had a suspicious ring.

They talked of "the craft down the bay," of "disliking their captain for not having nerve enough," of a "fear lest the vessel they wanted would never be found," and other matters that Merle and Little Belt wove together to suit themselves.

At last the two men arose and left the saloon, and glancing out through the curtain as they stood at the bar settling their score, Little Belt started visibly, and turning quickly cried:

"I know them!"

"Who are they?" whispered Merle, who had not changed his position.

"The two men who left the Treasure Island with Brandt, the Buccaneer, that night of the wreck," was the low response.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

"LITTLE BELT, await me here," cried Merle, when his companions made known who were the men whose voices had been recognized.

"Do not be rash, Captain Monte," urged Little Belt.

"I will not be, but await me here," and Merle disappeared, after the two sailors who had left the coffee-house.

They were quietly sauntering up the street toward the better part of the town, as though to enjoy a stroll; but Merle soon overtook them, and changing his voice and manner of speaking, in keeping with the rough exterior of his disguise, he called out:

"Ahoy, shipmates, and lay to for a shipmate as hasn't as lively a pair o' heels as you has."

The men turned and beheld a man in sailor garb, a heavy pea-jacket, hat drawn down over his forehead, and with unkempt hair and beard.

"I guess we hain't on the same tack, shipmate, so you can continue your voyage without us for consorts," responded one of the men, not prepossessed with the appearance of the one who hailed them.

"Now don't be rough, shipmate, when a man is a stranger in port, and not wanting to drink grog alone, has got the gold to ask messmates to join him."

This put a new phase upon the stranger, for if he had gold, he was a better man than he looked.

"Oh, you are a stranger in port, be you?" said the other.

"Yes, and was cruisin' round in search of a craft, though I don't need to ship, being as I has got gold enough to spend for a few months ashore."

A man with gold enough to last him a few months was not to be slighted, so the two seamen at once returned to the coffee-house with Merle, who led them to the very alcove they had formerly occupied, and which was the last one on that side, the one in which Little Belt sat being next to it.

"I drinks only wine, and the best; but order what you likes, shipmates," said Merle, as the three took seats.

Of course they could not resist wine, when they could get it free, so the two men ordered wine, and a bottle apiece was brought by the waiter to whom Merle had carelessly thrown a gold piece.

"I guess you hain't allus been afore the mast, shipmate," said one of the men, wishing to flatter Merle, as he had carelessly shown a large sum in gold, in paying the waiter.

"No. I has trod the quar-deck, and not when scrubbin' it nuther; but is your lads ashore or afloat now?"

"Oh we have berths on a good craft."

"You has?"

"Well, I wouldn't mind shipping again myself, if j st for comp'ny."

"Suppose you ship with us."

"I'll do it, if there's money in it, for I only goes wa-re there's gold to be made."

"Well, we are cruisin' for gold too; but we hain't as flush as you be."

"You hain't been on the same cruise, or you'd be able to put your hand on plenty."

"Now tell me what your voyage has been, an' I'll spin a yarn about my cruise, and then we'll see whether I ship with you, or you go with me."

"That's fair, shipmate, certain; but you do the talking first," was the cautious reply.

"I don't mind if I do; but you musn't peach on me, if you don't like my flag."

"Not we," said one.

"Guess your flag hain't worse than ours," said the other.

"Waal, there is a certain craft afloat that is called the Gold Ship."

The two men started, flushed, turned pale with excitement, and eagerly cried in chorus:

"We has heard of her."

"I guess so, for she has spoke many craft, and many craft has spoke her, and she's gettin' pretty well known."

"Do you belong to that craft?" eagerly asked one.

"Don't haul in slack too fast, shipmate, for you bother me."

"I says there is a craft afloat called the Gold Ship."

"Yes."

"We hear you. But she is not a ship, but a schooner."

"That is only a difference in name."

"No, in rig," muttered Merle.

"Yes, in rig, so it is; but go on, shipmate."

"Well, she is commanded by a young man—"

"A mere boy."

"Oh! you know him, do you?"

"I know all about him."

"Then no need o' my telling you."

"Yes, yes, go on; we don't know nothing."

"Ah! well, this young boy, as you calls him, had a fortin' left him, and it was hid on a island, and there were some wanted to get it, and so he bought a schooner, put his treasure on board, and set sail, for he is outlawed by his Government as a mutineer, and can't bring his craft into any port, until he can do something to get a pardon for the past."

"How do you know all this?" asked one of the men.

"I sails on the Gold Ship."

"Ha! you do?"

"I do."

"And where is she now?"

"She's afloat, if I am ashore; but you just ought to be on her, for the Boy Captain, or rather midshipman, for that's his real name, pays out his gold free, for you see what I has got," and Merle exhibited several hundred dollars before the delighted eyes of the two villains.

"Has this young captain of the Gold Ship got a black slave?"

"A hideous looking nigger, in face and form, but with a heart as tender and true as a woman's."

"We don't know nothing about his heart, but we does know about his looks and grip; but his name is Mezrak."

"Yes, Mezrak is with the cap'n, and a good fellow he is."

"And you say you want more men on board the Gold Ship?"

"Yes, does you want to ship on board?"

"If we knew where she was."

"Well, I'll tell you all about that when you spin your y rn."

"Well, shipmate, it won't take long to spin our yarn."

"We belongs on a cutter which is on a special cruise."

"We did sail with a captain, who got us wrecked on Treasure Island, and he and we two were all that escaped."

"We got away, it don't matter how, the captain, Jack here, and myself, and we just dropped the captain overboard and left him to die, while we went on and got a craft and crew to go back to the island for that very treasure."

"No!"

"Fact! but we got there to find the boy had already gotten a vessel and sailed away with his treasure, and we have been in pursuit of his Gold Ship ever since; but what, with running away from cruisers we have had bad luck until now."

"Luck has changed then?" asked Merle.

"It has, now that we have met you, for if you lead us to the Gold Ship, we will give you your first pick at the treasure."

"I can tell you a better plan than that, shipmates."

"What is it?"

"I will make you both rich, if you will put your craft in my power."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean for you to go to your vessel, tell your captain that you can lead a boat expedition against the Gold Ship, and do so."

"The crew can all be captured, and then the Gold Ship's boats will move upon your vessel, and your fortune is made."

"And we may get our necks stretched by the Boy Captain."

"No."

"And not get our fortune."

"I promise you do."

"Promises is cheap, shipmates."

"Well, I'll give you a thousand cash in hand before you start."

"What?" and the two men gazed upon their strange companion with surprise, but hung in the balance as to what to do, when a voice said calmly:

"You better agree to the captain's terms, lads!"

In horror they glanced upward, and beheld gazing over the partition of the alcove a smiling face.

But he held in each hand a pistol, and they were frowning.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SURPRISE PARTY SURPRISED.

THE little oyster sloop set sail shortly after dark, upon her return to the Gold Ship.

Her skipper and his men, true to their pledged word, had acted squarely, and after getting the stores on board, had patiently awaited the return of their employers.

The wind was fresh, and the sloop went gayly along, and in a few hours' time had reached the schooner, when the stores were at once removed to her hold, and the fishermen set sail for the oyster beds once more, perfectly delighted with the generosity of Merle Monte.

But, though having her stores on board, the Treasure Schooner did not set sail, but remained quietly at anchor in the inlet.

The day came and passed slowly away, and still the schooner tugged at her anchor.

But, when darkness settled upon the sea, a stir was visible upon the craft.

Up into the rigging went man after man, and strange to say, each one was clothed in white.

And then the sails were set, and along the gaff, the yards, against the masts and everywhere that a man could find a foothold or place to swing were the sailors placed by Merle Monte, who went himself aloft.

To an ordinary observer at a little distance the vessel would present the appearance of being at anchor under full sail; but to a close

scrutiny it would appear as though extra canvas had been furlled along the yards and spread about in the rigging.

Then all became silent on the craft, and a small boat was quietly lowered, into which got an ungainly form with a black face.

It was Mezrak, the Abyssinian slave of Merle Monte, and with muffled oars he pulled silently and swiftly away out of the inlet.

An hour perhaps he was gone, and Merle Monte, who stood on deck near the wheel, with Captain Trenor, Little Belt and Mrs. Branch near, began to get a little impatient, it seemed; but desecring at last the coming boat, he said:

"Th re comes Mezrak now, and we shall know soon."

A moment after the deformed Abyssinian sprung on deck and confronted his young master.

"Well, Mezrak?"

"They are coming, master," replied the slave, in his low, deep tones.

"How many boats?"

"Five, master."

"How far distant are they?"

"I rowed rapidly, master, and left them a mile behind me."

"Then it will be ten minutes before they are here, and the moon will be up above the tree-tops by that time, and perhaps betray our plot."

"But we must take the chances."

"Come, captain, we will go aloft, and you, Little Belt, go into the cabin with Mrs. Branch and Mezrak, and should they gain an entrance you will have to defend yourselves as best you can."

Merle said this, for he was not willing even to risk Mezrak or Little Belt could it be avoided, and he put their going into the cabin upon the plea of defending it, though the hatches, fore-castle and cabin companionway were all to be securely fastened.

As soon as Mrs. Branch, followed by Mezrak and Little Belt, had gone into the cabin, Merle and his lieutenant made a rapid survey of the vessel, and then each one taking up a sheet, wrapped it about his form and ascended the ratlines to the cross-trees.

Merle stationed himself in the main cross-trees, and Captain Trenor in the fore cross-trees, and they appeared like balls of white duck up there.

Presently the skies over the tree-tops inshore grew brighter, and the moon sailed up into sight.

But just then five dark objects were visible upon the water, drawing rapidly and silently upon the schooner.

The moon glistening upon the oar-blades as they rose and fell showed that they were boats moving silently to the attack.

Soon they divided, two sweeping around to starboard and three to port, and the next instant came the shock, and a loud voice shouted:

"Now, sea-dogs, the Gold Ship is ours!"

Over the bulwarks went the assailants in wild confusion; but above all, as they reached the deserted deck, and as from the clouds, rung out Merle Monte's trumpet tones:

"Lads, give those fellows lead in place of the gold they seek!"

A red glare illumined the scene, paling the silvery luster of the moon, and then three-score pistols flashed together, and sent a torrent of leaden balls down upon the heads of the boarders.

Dumb with amazement they stood, for they had expected little resistance, and felt they had completely surprised the craft, while, as they had advanced with muffled oars, comments against Merle Monte's seamanship had been whispered around, for having his vessel at anchor with all sail set.

Before they collected their scattered wits, another volley from aloft laid another score of the boarders dead and dying upon the decks, and then Merle Monte cried:

"Follow me, lads, for this is murder, and we must face our f es!"

And then like ghosts descending from aloft came Merle Monte and his crew down the rigging, some sliding down ropes, others dropping upon the heads of those beneath, and all coming pell-mell to the deck to join in the fight, while, out of the companionway suddenly darted a huge form, and a slender one was at his heels, as Mezrak and Little Belt engaged in the combat.

Surprised, where they had hoped to surprise, cut down where they had hoped to kill, the assailants were wholly unnerved, and in a short five minutes the combat ended with cries for quarter from those who had intended to snow no quarter.

"Spare them, men, for we need a larger crew," cried Merle, and the fight was ended, with the death of every officer of the boarding party, and about half of the seamen lying dead or dying upon the deck of the old ship.

"Well, shipmates, you have done your duty and earned your gold," said Merle, to two men who just then came crawling over the bulwarks, out of the boat to which they had shrunk back when the fight began.

They were the two men whom Merle and Little Belt had met in the coffee-house in Mobile, and one of them replied:

"No, captain, not yet, for the cutter is yet to be taken."

"How many men were left on board?" asked Merle.

"Twenty, sir, under the bo'sen."

"And she lies near here, you say?"

"In an inlet a league away, sir."

"Well, I will take my crew back in your boats and give the cutter a surprise," and five minutes after the boats of the pirate craft were returning to their vessel, but the oars were held by different hands, from those that had brought them to the schooner, and a different man was in command.

An hour's row, and the boats, under the pilotage of the two gold-bribed traitors turned into an inlet, where was visible a graceful little craft lying quietly at anchor.

"Boats, ahoy!" called out a stern voice from the deck.

"It's me bo'sen, Jack Burton, returning to tell you to get under sail and run down, for the schooner's ours," replied one of the traitor pirates, and a suppressed cheer was heard on board the cutter.

But it ended very quickly, when over the bulwarks sprung strange forms, and cutlasses and pistols hovered over the few occupants of the deck.

Without a shot Merle Monte captured the Gold Hunter, which had been searching for him, and, as he gave the order to get under way and run down to where the Gold Ship was, he said grimly:

"Now for the Huntress, for on her is our treasure of revenge, Mezrak."

"Yes, master, we must know no rest until Brandt, the Buccaneer, is run down."

CHAPTER XXV.

EXTRICATING HIMSELF FROM A DILEMMA.

I WILL now look backward a few chapters, and account to my reader for the mysterious disappearance of Pierre Dupont from the deck of the Gold Ship, and also of the armed craft which had been in the inlet, but was gone when search was made for her.

Pierre Dupont had not been exactly happy at the turn the tide had taken with regard to himself and his victims, for certainly were Mrs. Branch and Pearl such.

For reasons that will be developed, he had tried to coax Captain Trenor to allow the armed schooner in chase of the packet to come up with him, under the idea that it was a Government cutter.

But the wary captain had not been inveigled into such a mistake, and then had come the storm which wrecked his vessel.

Finding himself on board the Gold Schooner, Pierre Dupont was anxious to get off of her, for he knew well his danger, should she capture the brig and Basil Branch be found on board, and his villainy be exposed.

"That hot-headed boy would hang me to the yard-arm at once," he said, well knowing if Mrs. Branch and her husband were brought face to face his plot would all come out, and, under such circumstances, Basil Branch would soon recognize him as an old foe, though years had passed since they last met.

"I must take the chances and leave to-night, and once I am in safety, this Treasure Schooner will be my especial care, for the gold she holds is dearer to me than my past love for Annabel Branch and revenge," he muttered.

But his plan to go ashore in the boat Merle quietly thwarted, and then he had to find some other way to escape.

"It's a good league to the land, and the chances against me with sharks, but to swim it is my only hope," he muttered.

And to swim it he made up his mind to do, if Captain Trenor returned with the report that the strange schooner was still lying inshore, as reported by the skipper of the coaster they had overhauled.

And Captain Trenor did return with such re-

port, and, as the reader has seen, Pierre Dupont watched his chance and slipped overboard unseen.

He was a powerful man and a skillful swimmer, and after diving until out of eyesight of the schooner, he set off with bold, rapid strokes for the shore.

He was hampered with his clothes, and threw aside what he did not need to contain his papers, gold and other valuables he had secreted about him.

But still he knew well his danger, and every splash of a wave-cap made his heart bound, for fear that it was a shark looking for just such prey as he happened to be.

Nearer and nearer to the shore he drew, and yet it seemed to him that he was hardly moving.

But at last, after an hour had passed, and his strength was giving out, he touched the bottom, and could hardly refrain from a shout of joy.

He had landed upon one side of the entrance to the inlet, and running around the shore he soon came opposite to the vessel which Captain Trenor had seen.

Even in the darkness he could see her trim proportions; but these did not attract more than a glance, and then once more he took to the water and swam for the craft.

This swim was but play to him, and reaching the bow he caught hold of the bobstay, drew himself out of the water, and stepped upon the deck.

Half-a-dozen men were crouching down in the fore-castle, playing cards by the light of a battle-lantern, and suddenly they started to their feet in alarm, as there came to their ears in stern tones:

"Ho, men! this is a pretty watch you keep, with a foe preparing to attack you."

"The captain!" broke from every lip, as their eyes fell upon the dripping, half-clad form.

"Yes, your captain, and I catch you neglecting your duty."

"Up into that rigging, every one of you, and remain until I order you down."

And up into the rigging they went like monkeys, while the captain, as he had been called, walked aft.

But he was met in the waist by a young man who was going forward, and who started with surprise at seeing him.

"Ah, Murell, I am glad to find you on watch, for I caught that gang forward playing cards," said Pierre Dupont.

"Welcome back, Captain Dupont; but I was just going forward to stir these devils up, as the moment my back is turned they set to gambling like a pack of Chinamen."

"But how did you come, sir?"

"I swam aboard."

"But get the boats out ahead with muffled oars, to tow out of this trap, and haul the anchor up, while I go and get some brandy, for I am dry inside and wet outside, and as cold as a frog."

"There is wind enough to beat out, sir."

"I shall tow out, Mr. Murell, as I do not care to tack into the muzzles of the guns of an armed vessel lying outside."

"Ah!" said the lieutenant, with surprise, and he gave the orders necessary, and had all in readiness when his captain again returned to the deck.

"Give way, men!" ordered Pierre Dupont, sternly, and then he added: "Mind you, not a word in those boats, or a sound that a fox could hear, or you'll repent it."

The men saw that their captain was in deadly earnest, and in no humor to trifle with, and silently the oars were let fall, and the schooner moved slowly out toward the open water.

Keeping close inshore as the depth would allow, the schooner crept past the Gold Ship, and as the latter was moving in toward the inlet, she spread sail and stood rapidly up the coast.

"Well, Murell, we have made a fortunate escape," said Pierre Dupont, when his vessel was safe.

"From exactly what, Captain Dupont?" asked the lieutenant, who was a handsome young man whose face and bearing seemed out of place on a pirate's deck.

"From a vessel I yet intend to capture."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes, you have heard of the young midshipman, Merle Monte?"

"A mutineer?"

"Yes, he resented the punishment of his slave, by some tyrant of an officer, and it got him into trouble."

"He escaped from the yard-arm, to which he

was condemned, and it seems he is very rich, and had a king's fortune buried on an island off the Mexican coast."

"Brandt, the Buccaneer, knew of this, and tried to force the secret from him, but could not, and his vessel, with his prisoners on board, for he had captured Monte and the negro, was wrecked on the island."

"Merle Monte escaped death, and so did Brandt, the latter leaving in an open boat, as I understood it, to get a vessel and go back for the treasure."

"But the condemned middy was too quick for him, left the island, bought him a vessel, and with his treasure on board is now cruising about, and it is his vessel I left a few hours ago and which we have just escaped from."

"Which you left, captain?"

"Yes, Murell, for I have been on board of it for some time, having been picked up off of a Galveston Packet which was wrecked."

"Ah! the one you bade me lie in wait for and give chase to?"

"The same."

"You did well, Murell, and handled the schooner well not to have her go under in the storm."

"But the packet was too fast for you, and she escaped you, but was wrecked."

"And your plot to get possession of some one you sought, sir?"

"Fell through, for, as I say, I was taken off the wreck, with her captain and a lady passenger, and, as had luck would have it, one of the packet's boats was picked up by Brandt the Buccaneer—"

"Ha! that man?"

"Yes, he is again afloat, and is commander of the brig Montezuma, which he seized, and has armed."

"Well, he picked up the boat of the Flyaway, and it contained one against whom I sought revenge and another is one of Brandt's officers, her father, while the third is on the craft of Merle Monte."

"Now I am determined to run Merle Monte down and get his treasure, and then I will look for revenge by catching Brandt, the Buccaneer, and get the two on board his vessel whom I seek."

"You could perhaps capture this Monte and his vessel now, if we attack him."

"No, Murell, for I will not be rash."

"In our present trim we can fight the hawk but not the eagle, and Monte is the latter."

"I will hide the schooner on the coast, run up to the city, and get me a large crew and a couple of heavy guns, and then be able to capture both the Gold Ship and Brandt, the Buccaneer, for I have an old grudge against him I wish to settle."

"You know Brandt then, captain?"

"Yes, Murell, I sailed with him once, but I was a poor man then, and a common seaman before the mast, and because my pride slowed itself one day, he had me triced up and and lashed."

"I have a good memory, Lieutenant Murell; but now head for the mouths of the river, and when you have put me on some smack that will carry me up to the city, you run for the retreat in the bayou and await my coming."

In obedience, the Sea Marauder, as the schooner was known, headed for the mouth of the Mississippi, and a small smack was sighted and brought to, after several shots having been fired across its bows.

As the schooner drew near it, Pierre Dupont started suddenly and clutched the arm of his lieutenant, while he cried eagerly:

"Good God! behold!"

"What, senor?" asked the surprised lieutenant, who had never seen his chief so excited.

"That man and maiden!"

"I see a gentleman and a young girl on the smack, sir."

"They are Basil Branch and his daughter Pearl."

"I do not know them, captain."

"But I do."

"Here, Murell, you seize those two and bring them on board this vessel, for I do not wish to be seen by them now."

"Keep them prisoners until my return from the city, for I shall go up in the smack."

"When they are safe in the cabin, tell the skipper of the smack that you have a prisoner on board who has paid his ransom and you wish him to take him to the city—"

"But, captain—"

"Silence! and hear me!"

"I will be that prisoner, and it will relieve me of all suspicion, so that I will go up without fear of harm."

"Find out how Branch and his daughter came to be on the smack, and let me know."

"Now do as I command you, but under no circumstances leave the rendezvous until you hear from me, and if Branch and his daughter escape, I will hold you responsible."

"Do you understand my instructions, Lieutenant Murell?"

"I do, Captain Dupont."

"Then see that you carry them out," and Pierre Dupont disappeared in the cabin.

Soon after the schooner was in hailing distance, and the pirate lieutenant hailed:

"Smack ahoy!"

"Ay, ay," was the gruff response.

"I wish you to take a passenger up to the city, and you shall be paid for it."

"Who'll pay me?"

"I will, for I have gotten a liberal ransom from him, and now let him go free."

"A ransom?"

"Yes, for this is no Government cruiser, my man, but the pirate schooner Sea Marauder."

Unheeding the excitement his words caused on board the little smack, the pirate officer continued:

"Who is it you have there that just disappeared in the cabin?"

"Two passengers."

"Order them on deck again, that I may see them."

The skipper did as directed, and out of the cabin came Basil Branch and his daughter.

"Well, sir, who are you?" he asked, sternly.

"A planter of the Mississippi and my daughter, put on board of this smack to return to New Orleans," replied Basil Branch, calmly.

"If you are a planter you are doubtless rich and able to pay ransom, so I shall demand it of you."

"Men, lower away a boat and bring that gentleman and his daughter on board the schooner!"

Resistance was useless, and Basil Branch soon found himself accompanied by his frightened daughter in the cabin of the schooner.

Only a few hours before the smack had been brought to by the Huntress, and they had been put on board, Brandt making a rendezvous at which to meet Basil Branch, and giving him several gems of value to exchange for gold for his use in the city.

One by one these gems were offered as ransom, and refused by Murell, and the father and daughter were given notice that they would be kept as prisoners on board until a far larger amount was paid.

Then Pierre Dupont went into the boat and was rowed to the smack, which, by order of Murell at once held on for the city, the skipper deeply grieved at the fate of his passengers, but whose grief was quickly soothed by a generous sum in gold given him by the pirate captain.

And away sped the Sea Marauder, to hide in a secure retreat, and await the coming back of her daring and revengeful captain.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MYSTERIOUS CRAFT.

In one of the many water-ways, upon the now coast of Texas, a vessel was anchored, and from truck to water-line men were busy at work upon her.

In a clump of bushes on shore, and not more than half a mile distant three persons were crouched, gazing intently upon her.

That they wished to remain unseen was evident, as they were as still as statues, while the locality where the vessel was at anchor was proof that she had gone there to seek a safe retreat from curious eyes.

"They are rigging her into a schooner, as I live," said one of the three in the bushes.

"Yes, and putting old spars and sails upon her, with a stump bowsprit," replied a second one of the three.

"Look, master, they are rigging a false bow upon her," remarked the third.

The three were Merle Monte, Little Belt and Mezrak, and the vessel they were gazing upon so attentively, was none other than the Huntress, once the Montezuma.

"Come, Belt and Mezrak, we have seen enough to know that Brandt intends to boldly venture into Galveston harbor, and thither we will go," said Merle.

Cautiously back through the bushes they crept, and making a circuit on the shore they came to a boat lying hidden on the beach.

Into this they got, and Mezrak seizing the oars, he pulled through devious water-ways for

several miles, when at last the Gold Ship came into view, moored safely away in a narrow inlet.

Boarding the craft they entered the cabin, while Mezrak remained in the boat; but in an hour's time there came on deck two persons, whom no one would ever believe to be Merle Monte and Little Belt, while accompanying them was Mrs. Branch enveloped in shawl and bonnet.

As Merle Monte approached the gangway, Captain Trenor joined him, and to him he said:

"Mezrak will return, Captain Trenor, as soon as he has landed us, and to-morrow you had better stand out, so as to be off the harbor a little after dark, and you can stand off and on to await our coming."

"God give you success, Captain Monte," said the captain, and soon after the boat was moving away under the impulse of Mezrak's strong strokes, and in it were Merle, Little Belt, and Mrs. Branch.

The scene now changes to the following afternoon, and to the then town of Galveston.

Two persons are standing quietly upon the shore, gazing out upon the numerous vessels in the harbor, and the reader will recognize in them Merle Monte and Little Belt, in the same disguise which had so cleverly deceived the traitor pirates in the Mobile coffee-house.

"Do you recognize the brig, Little Belt?" asked Merle Monte, with a smile, glancing the while at no particular vessel.

"I do."

"It is the fifth one from the shore in a line with that dregher."

"The same one that I picked out, so now to go on board."

They hailed a waterman passing, and asked to be rowed out to the disguised brig.

Arriving on board, Merle asked the officer in charge of the deck if they wanted to ship a couple of good seamen.

The answer was in the affirmative, and the two friends departed, promising to come back with their kits later in the day.

They had gained their point, which was to discover if the craft was really the pirate brig they had seen so skillfully disguised.

"Well, Belt, that is the brig, and what is more, the officer, in spite of his disguise, betrayed himself by his voice as Brandt."

"Yes, and he is here for some deviltry, of course."

"He may have come in for stores and ammunition, not having been successful in captures of late."

"At any rate, with his guns and three-fourths of his crew in the hold, and the brig disguised as she is, we never would have suspected him, had we not seen his little game."

"True, he is an adept at disguises."

"Equal to you, Little Belt," said Merle, with a smile, recalling the numerous disguises the woman had assumed.

"Well, now we are to see if Mrs. Branch can play her part well."

"I believe that she can, for she is a woman of great nerve and presence of mind," replied Merle, and the two walked on to the inn, where they had left that lady, and where we will follow her in her daring venture.

Shortly after the entrance of Merle and Little Belt into the inn Mrs. Branch came out, richly dressed and heavily veiled.

Straight to the shore she took her way, and calling to a boatman bade him row her out to the disguised brig.

The boat was promptly hailed, but when the boatman answered, "A lady to see the captain," a voice answered:

"Ay, ay; come alongside!"

The man obeyed, and Mrs. Branch was met at the gangway by the same one whom Merle and Little Belt had seen, and was shown into the cabin.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MRS. BRANCH PLAYS A BOLD GAME.

UPON entering the cabin Mrs. Branch saw that the same intention to disguise the vessel had been carried on there as outwardly. But she came there for a bold purpose, and at once entered upon the carrying of it out.

Removing her veil, the officer who had said he was the vessel's captain saw before him a sad but lovely face, and his quick eyes discovered that her fingers glittered with jewels of great price.

She beheld a man of large size, rather stout, with full red beard and hair of the same hue, and her penetrating gaze could see that they

were both false, as well as that the pretended flesh was put on.

"How can I serve you, lady?" asked the captain.

"I was told that your vessel had reached here en route to New Orleans."

"Ahem! ah! yes, certainly, ma'am, certainly; we are bound for New Orleans," answered the skipper, in an embarrassed way, wondering how she had heard such a report about his vessel.

"Well, sir, I am most anxious to reach New Orleans, and the late piracies against the packet ships, sir, have decided me to take a vessel of more humble calling, and, if you will pardon me, I have sought your craft as such, for I expect to carry with me a very large sum in gold and gems, and no one would look for riches beneath your deck."

Not a muscle of the captain's face quivered, as he replied:

"True, lady, we poor skippers are often unmolested as not worthy a pirate's shot at us even, and were one to board the Sweetheart—the name of my humble vessel, madam—he would not be repaid for his trouble."

"But, if you can put up with the poor accommodations I offer, my cabin and best state room are at your service, for we have not fine quarters, as we don't often get rich passengers."

"I thank you, sir, and if business does not detain you here, I would gladly pay you liberally if you could sail at an early hour, for it is necessary that I should be in New Orleans at the earliest possible moment."

"I will sail, madam, at dark, and will have a boat at shore for you at any hour you may appoint."

"What time would suit you best, captain?"

"About sunset, madam, as I send ashore then for two seamen I shipped this morning."

"That will do, as I can hardly get ready before then, for the truth is, I have to be most careful regarding my gold and gems, and pack them so as to avoid suspicion."

"You are right, madam, perfectly right, for evil eyes are about in these days, ready to ferret out work for any crime."

"Yes, captain, we live in a very wicked world," replied the lady, as she arose and took her leave.

The captain escorted her to the boat, and promised to have a yawl awaiting her at the appointed time.

And promptly at the time the yawl was there and found a vehicle awaiting, and the two sailors, shipped in the morning, seated upon their kits near by.

It was just after sunset, and darkness was falling rapidly; but the captain, who had himself come on shore after his fair and wealthy passenger, saw that the vehicle held also several trunks which were very heavy.

But all were soon on board, and the fair passenger discovered that two other boats were busy, carrying out boxes to the vessel apparently filled with stores of some kind.

In a short while all was in readiness for departure, the crew were called to get the anchor up and set sail, and the two seamen recently shipped sprung to work with a will.

As the vessel moved off from her anchorage Mrs. Branch went on deck and joined the captain, who seemed most attentive to her.

She asked many questions about sea life, and kept the skipper really entertained until the vessel was fairly on her way.

"See, captain, is not that a pretty vessel?" she cried, as a craft under full sail, heading in toward the harbor, swept up.

The skipper started, looked fixedly at the stranger and said:

"Yes, madam, and it is a cruiser running into port, and, doubtless, one of the new vessels the United States has had built for service in the Gulf, for I do not recognize her."

"Please ask your helmsman to go nearer that I may get a better view of her."

The skipper could not refuse, and the vessel was so pointed that the cruiser must pass within easy pistol-shot range.

"Oh, captain, she is so beautiful, let me wave a greeting to her," and Mrs. Branch in apparent ecstasy, and seizing a lantern she quickly whirled it twice around her head.

"My dear madam, that may be taken as a signal," cried the captain, excitedly, and he seized the lantern rudely from her hand.

"Ah, captain, have I done wrong?" she cried in a sweet way, as if repentant.

"You have, madam, for see the cruiser is heading so as to speak to us—ha! she goes about!"

"No! the cruiser! we did not signal you."

"By Heavens! she will run us aboard!"

"Boarders ahoy! to repel boarders!" and the captain darted into his cabin, to almost instantly return with cutlass and pistols.

"Up with those hatches!"

"Ho, dogs, on deck, here and defend yourselves!"

But, as the chief yelled his orders in trumpet tones, the cruiser swept alongside, grapples were thrown, and scores of gallant tars came bounding upon the deck, to the horror of the crew that were pouring up from the hatches and out of the forecastle.

"Ho, men! at them and beat them down!"

The one who uttered these words, had dragged from his face and head a false beard and wig, and stood revealed as Merle Monte.

"Merle Monte, by the gods!"

"Then we are well met!" shrieked the skipper, who now threw aside his disguise and sprang toward the youth.

"Ay, Brandt the Buccaneer, I am Merle Monte, and yonder craft is my Gold Ship."

"Come, Sir Pirate, I'll cross that blade of yours, stained as it is with innocent blood," cried Merle, and at once the cutlasses of the two clashed together, for Merle had been handed a weapon by one of his men as they boarded the brig.

Hot and fierce the combat waged between the two, for the fight on deck forward had quickly ended, as not half the pirates had been able to leave the hold, and then Merle Monte disarmed the great chief, and he was seized and ironed by a dozen strong arms.

"Quick, Captain Trenor, take charge of the brig and spread all sail, for we must get out of this, as there are cruisers in port that will be after us," cried Merle, and almost instantly the two vessels swung apart, sail was crowded on both, and away they sped over the dark waters.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THERE was no more popular cruiser in the American Navy, than was the Sea Wolf, and her handsome commander Mayo Meredith, was the beau ideal of manhood in many a lovely woman's eyes, and a model officer and gentleman in the eyes of the younger officers of the service.

The Sea Wolf had done good service in many ways, and was just returning from a successful cruise, and on her way to New Orleans, when a calm caught her in the mouth of the Mississippi river, and she had to let go her anchors into the muddy bottom of that turbid stream.

With sunset, as was fondly hoped by officers and crew, no wind came to fill the sails, and the stanch craft had to remain at her anchorage, the gloom of the low banks, draped in funeral moss, the song of insects and hoot of owls causing a feeling of gloom to fall upon all on board.

To escape the blue influence Captain Mayo Meredith gave up pacing the deck and sought the cheery cabin.

Throwing himself into an easy-chair, he became lost in thought for a moment until his eyes fell upon a handsome sword suspended near, and he muttered:

"I must put that present from Monte out of sight, for it gives me the blues whenever I see it."

"Ah, poor Merle! what a sad fate is yours."

"Born to command, commencing your career most brilliantly in the service, and now condemned to death by a Government you served most well, and hunted down as though you were a pirate, which men say you have become."

"But I cannot believe it, for I know your heart was in the right place."

"A man to see you, sir," said a middy, entering.

"One of the seamen?"

"No, sir."

"Who can it be?"

"He just came aboard, sir, in a boat that is alongside."

"This is strange, for I saw no vessel in sight at dark that he could have come from."

"But show him down."

The next instant a seaman entered and saluted politely.

"Well, my man, who are you and from whence do you come?" said Captain Meredith, politely.

"Captain Meredith, who I am I will make known to you ere long, and I come from on board my vessel, which is concealed in a bayou on the coast some leagues from here."

"Ah! you belong to a vessel, then, that had to hide away?"

"I do, sir, I frankly admit."

"I belong to a craft of which you have heard; but it is not of my vessel that now I have come to speak to you, but of two that I wish to surrender into your hands."

"Indeed, sir, you are well off to be in command of three vessels," said Captain Meredith, with a smile.

"Two of them, sir, as I said, it is my intention to turn over to you, as they are vessels which you are most anxious to have in your possession, as well as their crews."

"Ha! you have a deeper meaning than your words imply."

"Be explicit, please, and frank."

"I will, sir, and tell you at once that the vessels I refer to are—first, the one-time Mexican cutter Iturbide, and captured by a Captain Eduardo, who became a pirate when he failed to find a certain treasure he was in search of."

"By Heaven! have you that man Eduardo and his vessel in your power?" somewhat excitedly asked Captain Meredith.

"I have the vessel, sir, and part of the crew in irons on board of her; but her pirate captain and his officers, with many men, were killed."

"My dear sir, who are you?" asked Captain Meredith, bluntly.

"First let me tell you of the second craft, sir, I have to turn over to you."

"I hope it is either the vessel of Brandt, the Buccaneer, or the Sea Marauder, the two worst sea devils afloat."

The stranger smiled and answered:

"It is not only the Huntress, sir, but her commander, Brandt, the Buccaneer."

Captain Meredith sprung to his feet with something very like an oath to express his pleasure passing his lips, while his handsome face flushed with excitement.

"Brandt, the Buccaneer, is your prisoner, you say?"

"He is, sir."

"And you have his vessel too?"

"And crew, sir."

"Shout the glad tidings! Why, my man, whoever you are, you'll be made a commodore for this, and if you'll only run down the Sea Marauder you'll become an admiral."

The visitor smiled, and said quietly:

"Permit me to tell you how they were captured," and in a few words he told his story of the capture of both vessels.

"Now, sir, tell me who you are?"

"I am one, Captain Meredith, that is an outlaw, branded and condemned to the yard-arm because I simply defended my life against those who sought to harm one I dearly love and to bring dishonor upon me."

"Merle Monte, by all that's holy!" and Captain Meredith grasped the hand of his visitor, and continued:

"Come, off with that disguise, Merle, and let me see your noble face."

"No, Captain Meredith, for you forget that I am condemned to die from the yard-arm of this very vessel."

"But Government will pardon you for the service you have done."

"I have not, in my own mind, done ought to ask pardon for; but as the ban of condemnation is upon me, I will yet accomplish one more task that is before me."

"For God's sake, Monte, never board a craft upon the high seas, if, as rumor has it, you are the captain of the mysterious vessel known as the Gold Ship."

"Captain Meredith, my acts shall be open to the world, and the vessels I board, for I do command the Gold Ship, shall never be the losers by me, unless they are of the free-rover stripe, and such craft are getting few and far between nowadays."

"But information has come to me the past few days that the captain of the Sea Marauder is a man who was in my power unknown to me, and that he now has at his mercy prisoners whom I have pledged myself to wrest from him."

"When I capture that man, Captain Meredith, I will sail into port and deliver my vessel and myself into your hands."

"But, until then, sir, I command a flagless vessel, and my cruise shall be a havenless one."

"Now, sir, if you will get under way—for the wind is rising, as you notice—I will pilot you to where the two pirate vessels are anchored."

"Gladly will I do so, Monte, and my officers and men shall—"

"No, no, sir; I am to be known in this matter to you alone."

"Wait until I end my cruise before you make it known that I still continued to serve my Government, that outlawed me."

"As you please, Monte, for you know best; but come on deck with me, and the vessel is in your hands."

The officers and crew of the Sea Wolf were greatly surprised to see their captain come from the cabin with the strange visitor, who at once ordered the anchor up and sail set, in a voice that belied his looks, for they did not penetrate his disguise.

Taking the wheel then, Merle ran the Sea Wolf along the coast, close inshore, and after a sail of a couple of hours entered one of the numerous inlets there to be found.

The startling cry of "Sail ho!" from the lookout drew every eye upon two vessels anchored near together and plainly visible in the darkness.

Involuntarily the men sprung to their guns, but their captain gave no order, and the strange pilot luffed up and ordered the anchor let fall.

Then the secret became known, when Captain Meredith called away the boats to go and take possession of the pirate vessels, and when Brandt, the Buccaneer, was brought on board the Sea Wolf, heavily ironed, a wild yell of joy broke from the crew.

And in the darkness the strange visitor departed, as silently as he had come, and no one other than the captain knew who or what he was.

But when in the future Merle Monte kept his word to yet hunt down the Sea Marauder, and then bring her into port, the world was more than ready to welcome the Condemned back from his long, havenless cruise in his Gold Ship, and make of him a hero, for had he not in the end brought Brandt, the Buccaneer, to a merited death, and rescued from the power of Pierre Dupont the prisoners against whom he had sought such cruel revenge?

Yes, kind reader, Merle Monte, the Condemned Midshipman, did this—and more, far more than my pen can follow in the wake of, during his cruise in the Gold Ship.

See "Merle Monte's Fate; or, Pearl, the Pirate's Pride," a companion story to "The Gold Ship; or, Merle, the Condemned."

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